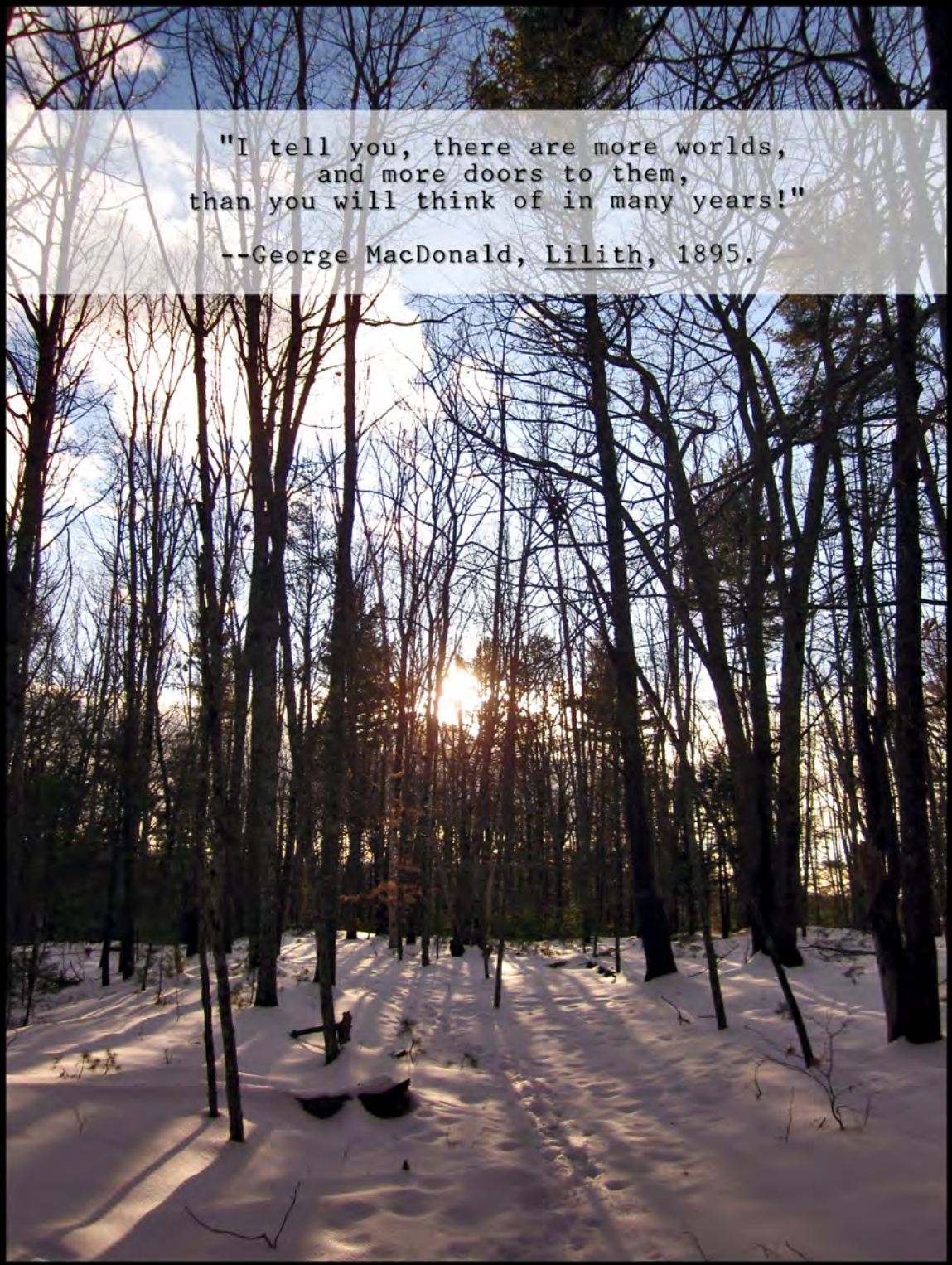




The
Cenacle no.111

april 2020 | 25th anniversary issue

A photograph of a winter forest. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. Numerous bare, thin trees stand in the foreground and middle ground, their branches reaching upwards. In the background, some evergreen trees are visible. The sun is shining from behind the trees in the center, creating a bright glow and long shadows on the snow. The sky is a pale blue with some light clouds.

"I tell you, there are more worlds,
and more doors to them,
than you will think of in many years!"

--George MacDonald, Lilith, 1895.

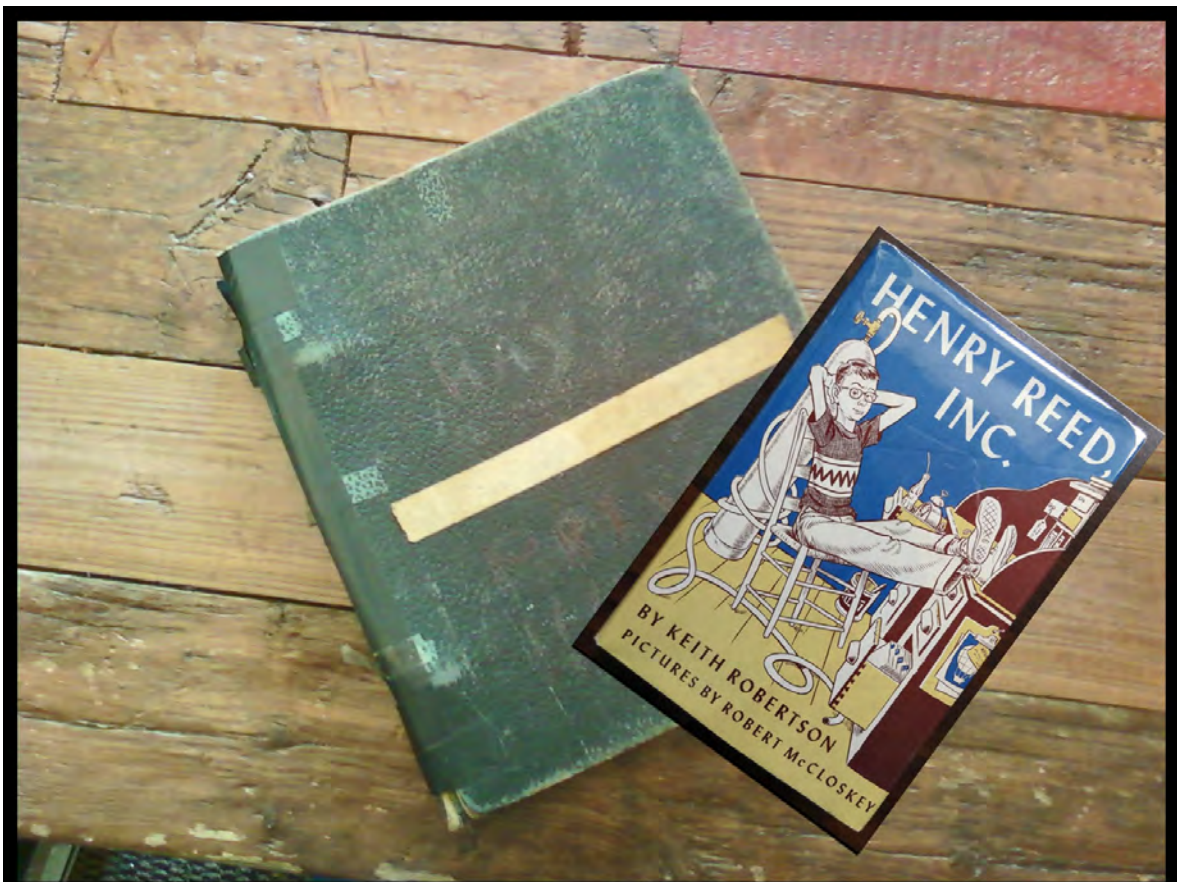
May 4, 2020
8:25 am.
Bungawee —
Office Desk
Mikrose, MA.

Welcome to the 25th anniversary issue of The Ceracle! Running a little late from somewhere & somewhere along the Global COVID-19 pandemic.

25 years & nearly a hundred issues (a few double-issues & there explains #11). Much of this issue, tho not all, addresses the current crisis, in one way or another.

Today I've been thinking back even further than 1995 when I bought a \$500 desktop photocopier at a Boston-area Staples, & decided to publish the works of all my friends, & my own, & not worry about rejection slips from magazines & publishers. This was long before desktop publishing & the Internet changed the game forever —

No, further back, May 4, 1974, the day I started my journal. Inspired by a book called Fenny Reed Inc. (1958)



44

about a boy who keeps a journal, not a diary. Written by Keith Robertson.

Before, 21 years before, The Cenacle began in a Cambridge apartment not far from Harvard University. I was a 10-year-old boy with paper, pencil & a thrift store notebook. Reading through those pages about school struggles, romantic failures, & always a wish for friends I could trust, I find it was writing that buoyed me up, pushed me further along, excited me with mystery & power.

Come 1995, I had been doing it a long time, with various kinds of home-from publications along the way. I'd gotten better & better as I experienced more of life & filtered it, mostly by black pen now, onto paper. My friends along the way most often those who made Art too.

So, here I am now, tonight, in my office, in my house, KD, downstairs on the shore to her mother, checking in more these days as many of us do.

My first notebooks are in a heap nearby. Cenacle 11 April 1995 leans against my lap.

45

And there is a global pandemic,
been ramp the world all of 2020. KD
been shuttered in place for nearly 4 I've
two months now.

I am who I was in 1974 & 1995, but
not completely. Mostly for better. I've been
at this issue within this pandemic & will
likely finish it before it "ends." It's a
good issue, end to end. I'm as proud
of this one as every single one going
back to #1 25 years ago.

Thinking about all this reminds
me of something my dear friend JBIII
used to say to me, when we were
drunk, high, whatever:

"We are what we were...
but not...
what we shall become!"
Blue-gray eyes atwinkle as he so
declared.

I still feel some of that boy in me
who decided to start a journal, not
a diary. And some of that younger man

—46—

who corralled his friends in the hopes of
sparking a revolution in American life & work.
And still the man mostly who hasn't
been out in the world so much in many
weeks.

And will become the man who eventually
braves outside my own property again.

There is a thread along my way,
from then to then to now & hence. Mine
is shaped primarily like black pens &
paper.

You have one too, each & every one
of you, to follow along your years, even
through a crisis like this. If you've
trusted it before, trust it now, keep hold
to unknown days. You, too, are who you
were, but not who you will become.

This world too. 6 billion threads?
I do think so. I do think this crisis
will teach us new what matters in
this world. I do think our challenge
will be more than to never go back.
It will be to recognize, fully & finally,
that we can't go back. 5/4/2020



Edited by
Raymond Soulard Jr.

Assistant Editor: Kassandra Soulard

FEEDBACK.....	1
FROM THE ELECTROLOUNGE FORUMS.....	4
NOTES FROM NEW ENGLAND [COMMENTARY] by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [📍].....	16
POETRY by Joe Ciccone.....	47
RIVERS OF THE MIND [A NOVEL] by Timothy Vilgate.....	49
POETRY by Martina Newberry.....	66
CHURCH IN THE GREENHOUSE [PANDEMIC JOURNAL] by Tamara Miles.....	70
MANY MUSICS [POETRY] by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [📍].....	79
NASCENT BLACK MARKET ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE TIDES OF THE SUN [TRAVEL JOURNAL] by Nathan D. Horowitz.....	81
POETRY by John Echem.....	85
THE MAN WHO HID MUSIC [FICTION] by Tom Sheehan.....	86
POETRY by Judih Haggai.....	89
25TH ANNIVERSARY GALLERY.....	91
THE PERVERT OF PICKETT CREEK [PROSE] by Charlie Beyer.....	94
AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA: MY COMMUNITY'S STORY [PHOTO GALLERY] by Ekponoimo Iphyok.....	96
POETRY by Colin James.....	99
NOTES ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) by Jimmy Heffernan.....	101
BAGS END BOOK #15: IT WAS A DREAM OF RAIN, PART 2 [FICTION] by Algernon Beagle.....	105

POETRY	
by Ace Boggess.....	125
TWICE VISITING THE GUARDIANS OF THIS SACRED THAI WATERFALL [TRAVEL JOURNAL]	
by Leia Friedman.....	126
POETRY	
by Sam Knot.....	133
THE METAMORPHOSIS [CLASSIC FICTION]	
by Franz Kafka.....	143
LABYRINTHINE [A NEW FICTION]	
by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [🔗].....	153
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS.....	163

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Accompanying disk to print version contains:

- *Cenacles* #47-111
- Burning Man Books #1-72
- *Scriptor Press Sampler* #1-18
- *RaiBooks* #1-8
- RS Mixes from “Within’s Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution”; &
- Jellicle Literary Guild Highlights Series

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Thank you to everyone in the world who has helped us to survive this global pandemic. Stay strong!



SCRIPTOR PRESS



NEW ENGLAND

2020

Feedback on Cenacle 110 | December 2019

From Martina Newberry:

Such a good issue! So many delights . . . The dialogue in Ace Boggess's *States of Mercy* novel excerpts is so alive that I feel like I'm there in the conversation . . . Sam Knot's lovely poem "La Rozel" offers a beautiful lesson in how to end a poem, & his "Gardener's Worlds" is an absolute enchantment . . . Such fine writing from Charlie Beyer in "Crocodile King of Belize" Bravo! . . . Algernon Beagle's fiction "It Was a Dream of Rain" is just so fascinating & fun. It's surreal in a way that I like &, once I've begun reading, I can't stop . . . Judih Haggai's haiku brings me to such a thoughtful place. Reading her poems, my mind quiets itself, & I am able to see pictures of good things . . . Nathan Horowitz's "Green Star Soup" travel journal stays with me even unto my dreams. Beautifully written, tight, clean, unfettered . . . Colin James's poem "Appeasing the Unmeaningful" grabbed & held me to that most excellent last line!

* * * * *

From Nathan D. Horowitz:

Ace Boggess's *States of Mercy* novel excerpts show him a masterful observer of human psychology, evoking the eternal dance of yin & yang through specific, hyper-realistic sensory details. Reading these fictions is like being transported back in time to the year 2000, when hearts still ran wild, & the women tasted of champagne & grape lip-gloss.

I knew it wasn't going to end well, & I enjoyed every minute of it! Charlie Beyer's tale "The Crocodile King of Belize" concludes in a beautifully- & intelligently-evoked slow-motion train wreck of personalities & clashing cultures as, fueled by poverty, Nature reclaims its own.

* * * * *

From Charlie Beyer:

Jimmy Heffernan's "Notes on God" studies human beliefs in many kinds of deities, including the great hive mind of the computer. I personally find these beliefs remarkably naive, unintelligent, & self-debasing. Us nervous monkeys want to think we are the highest form of life on this planet but, in our insecurity, we have to envision yet another one—who is more powerful than all of us.

No other animal is this stupid. *What are the chances of a cat praying to a god?* None. *It knows* that it is a god already. *Why don't we?*

To ask *why we are here?* is irrelevant. Maybe we should get out of our self-absorption & ask: *why is anything here?* Thanks, Jimmy, for asking the tough questions.

* * * * *

From Jimmy Heffernan:

The student of anthropology in me was forcefully aroused while reading Sam Knot's "Le Rozel," a poem of a dazzling, atmospheric past that we cannot forego nor surmount. What are we able to imagine about these distant, forbidden hominins that has any truth, any natural coloration? Are these antecedents gone forever, or do they have something to whisper to our hyper-connected collective?

Certainly these ghosts were not poets, nor was written language even a gleam in the eye of God when these fellows playfully trekked across Le Rozel. How did they talk? What did they dream? Perhaps their colloquies were in a kind of holistic song; perhaps they had not yet graduated from dull clicks & grunts.

Whatever the case, the modern poet cannot help but declare their legacy to be one of vivid, efflorescent resonance in a zone of the soul

that cannot quite consign the dying dream to oblivion. And so, perhaps, there is hope for humanity, if not the poet.

* * * * *

From John Echem:

Sam Knot's poem "Le Rozel" leaves me awestruck. It humanizes the sun with "footprints which are hard to decipher," evident in the lacerations on sediments. This poem's succinct illustrations of natural affect on humanity places him on the literary firmament of bards.

* * * * *

From Sam Knot:

I loved Kassi Soulard's cover of this issue: the trees, the torn edges, the quotes, the sense of narrative, the texture of the tabletop.

Raymond Soulard Jr.'s poem "Unitive" really struck me, swept me up & away. I felt he knew I was going somewhere new with him, & was conscious of his duty as a guide. Although this is poetry, it manages to incorporate something of that wonderfully immersive experience one gets from prose, where one finds oneself inside a scene, & characters live & breathe—yet with all the beauty & power of poetry, where one's feelings begin to surge & sing like music.

Martina Newberry's poems treat us to her wry & self-deprecating sense of humor. I wanted to defend her, & thus likely myself, at the end of "It Could Be Said," when she states she thought only of herself, again, whilst meditating on a group of Thai children, themselves meditating for world peace. I wanted to say something like, *well, I guess it takes one to no-one!*

Her poem "Consider This" contemplates with much beauty on the unrepeatability of events, that is a source of their preciousness. She ends the poem with one of the feelings that might

distinguish the poet from the monk: this oneness of things being never enough.

But, of course, neither poet nor monk would fit happily into either of my hastily-constructed boxes. Poets don't write merely to repeat or to hold onto or fix things or events (though perhaps we should be aware of how writing sometimes seems to create the illusion of such), but as part of our own movings forward, making new heart's paths. Like the past, memory need not be considered as something the mind merely brings into now, as an unwanted houseguest—for it lives here too, just as we do.

* * * * *

From Ace Boggess:

Martina Newberry's poem about meditation & peace, "It Could Be Said," so smoothly transforms into a heartfelt self-exploration that I, as a reader, felt momentarily shaken. The language is powerful, & the long lines add a Whitmanesque flow. Connecting the personal to the universal like this is what the best poetry does.

* * * * *

From Judih Haggai:

Martina Newberry's "Consider This" remains achingly beautiful each time that I read it. I hear her voice in my head as I join her with my own voice. She proclaims in a rich collage of images of how "once, our bones knew of miracles," & "once, the sun came up with music & poems & warm breath"—each of the hauntingly poignant images leaves a pulse of its own in my soul.

* * * * *

From Timothy Vilgiate:

Raymond Soulard Jr.'s poem "Unitive" does a great job of evoking its sweet innocent protagonist in a surreal, fantastical world, & traveling with her through waves of wonder, terror, joy, & sadness. I can tell the *Tangled Gate* world has been imagined & contemplated very deeply, & I would really like to read more of the poems from this series!

* * * * *

From Colin James:

Tom Sheehan's poem "The Semaphore in Sunlight Flew" impressed me with its beautiful title. I kept reading it through and coming back to the title—& then began reading the title aloud after every stanza . . .

* * * * *

From Tamara Miles:

Love involves a lot of waiting & letting go, & participating where & when we can, even if it is only in the mind. Like what Tom Sheehan describes in his moving poem, "The Semaphore in Sunlight Flew," as he remembers his father slipping off a hundred times in the middle of the night to fish alone—hearing the sound of the tackle box & other night fishing sounds, the presence of his father somewhere unseen, following his dream.

* * * * *



Ekponoimo Iphyok

From the ElectroLounge Forums

Coronavirus Documentation Project

Published on electrolounge.boards.net.

* * * * *

April 2, 2020

Dear friends,

This is a separate request from the usual *Cenacle* ones (for writings, feedback, etc.). That request will come soon.

But for this one, I'm reaching out to all the *Cenacle* contributors to help me to document experiences and perspectives of the global pandemic crisis we are all part of right now. I think it is too easy for any of us to close into ourselves, away from the world, especially since we are told that sheltering away in place is our best, safest activity.

While we should do this, the physical sheltering, it does not mean we have to lose track of the larger picture, of what this crisis means from different perspectives. So I have included six questions I'd very much like you take a little time to think over and answer for me.

I will share what I receive back on the *ElectroLounge Forums* and in *The Cenacle*. Think of these questions as inviting snapshots from your mind at this strange moment in our collective time. Thanks so much!

Peace,
Raymond

* * * * *

From Martina Newberry (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

MN: Our favorite coffee shop closed its doors—no deliveries, just closed. We go there nearly every day, have friends we meet there—people we really love. Though I was already self-isolating, the thought that they were there, serving coffees and pastries, comforted me.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

MN: I'm not sure. At one time, I might have said that some good comes of everything. I think so many of us are beaten down and sick and scared that, once the quarantine is lifted, there may be nothing good left to think about. Well, maybe the kindness of loved ones, but we already knew who would respond.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

*MN: My husband is the best person I've ever known. He is my knight, my rock, my everything. He makes funny faces, says funny things, makes super good burritos, holds me when all I can do is cry. He runs whatever little errands we need. I cook his favorite meals, and surround him with gratitude and love. A couple of our friends have kept in touch and made sure we are OK. My beautiful sister sent **big** care packages.*

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

MN: I'm afraid not. My fears are paralyzing. My writing suffers terribly; my eating habits are egregious.

What is your greatest fear right now?

MN: Death and right-wingers with guns.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

MN: "Would you like one of my husband's burritos?"

* * * * *

From Judih Haggai (Israel):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

JH: When my daughter's boyfriend ignored the reports of the virus and decided to go skiing in Barcelona, as if he'd be immune. He came back to two weeks' isolation to determine if he was infected. Then my daughter's roommate was put into isolation since she'd attended a party with someone later diagnosed. My daughter had to leave and come home. Her entire city was closed and became a refuge for those diagnosed. This was the beginning of the feeling of how large this was going to become.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

JH: I wish it were obvious that people would learn that they don't need to buy so much, to waste so much, to be so unaware of their health. It's hard for me to believe that such a realization will occur. Perhaps the world will start to cooperate faster in the future. Perhaps the American population will see that voting in a president more interested in ratings than in speaking the truth is not the greatest idea.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

JH: As usual, we're in touch everyday with video chats. Nothing's new—we all live far from one another. We still share recipes and joy in photos. Only now, I have the luxury of having our youngest at home after her dorms were closed—and she, like everyone else, is studying online. So, I'm happy!

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

JH: By grace do you mean joy? Often! The peacefulness of the fields around the kibbutz. The generous nature of the people around here. Disasters bring out their compassion. Just like during wartime, people here become more humane.



What is your greatest fear right now?

JH: Greatest fear would have to be that my kids aren't taking things seriously enough and are interacting with people without taking enough precautions. Same for family members in the U.S.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

JH: "Come, take a moment to sit with me and do some mindful meditation. Notice your feet on the floor, how your body feels at the moment. Notice the sensation of your clothes. Focus on any emotions you're experiencing and allow yourself to feel them. Accept what you notice. Treat yourself kindly."

* * * * *

Nathan D. Horowitz (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

NDH: There was a week where it started feeling very real, and I started talking about it to my students, who hadn't heard much about it. At work, my colleagues who were Democrats started worrying about it before the Republicans. I could tell who was watching Fox News and who wasn't.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

NDH: Every event has infinite ramifications, some that we judge good, some which we judge bad. I can only repeat what I've heard: maybe more work will be done from home; maybe Nature will recover slightly from the horrible damage we have been inflicting on it.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

NDH: We're doing all right. Here in Kansas, my wife and daughter and I are actually getting along better than usual, now that we don't need to be constantly rushing off early in the morning to school or weekend activities.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

NDH: For the last bunch of years, I've felt like I've been rushing around far more than I've wanted to. Having to shelter in place is like an answer to my prayers. I'm fully aware that things could get very bad but, for now, it feels cozy and safe to be able to stay home and work. I love our third-floor balcony.



What is your greatest fear right now?

NDH: I would ordinarily say monsters under the bed, but these days I'm sleeping on a mattress on the floor, so I've got that one solved.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

NDH: "This, too, shall pass."

* * * * *

John Echem (Nigeria):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

JE: The moment when this global pandemic felt real to me is when I watched the situation of the virus in Italy; military vehicles carrying frightening numbers of dead bodies. Also, the first case of the virus registered in Nigeria, by an Italian tourist, was worrisome to me. But when the son of Abubarka Atiku, a former vice president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, returned to the country as a victim of the pandemic, I knew we have less hope due to our poor healthcare centers and unreliable government.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

JE: I think the good that can come out of this global scourge is redefining global solidarity, regardless of race, culture, and religious sentimentality.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

JE: My loved ones and I find this malady a critical situation, as we're separated by distance. I was supposed to travel to my hometown of Akpoha, to visit my ailing mother and assess her recuperation. Due to the national lockdown, I couldn't achieve that dream and it perturbs me.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

JE: No. The crisis and its many worries have brought more worries to me. This morning I sent an e-mail to one of the school directors I do part-time teaching for, asking for my unpaid salary. He held the pandemic culpable for disorganizing his financial situation. He said the loan he tried to get from the bank is not feasible due to the pandemic. It's the same reasons other directors of schools are giving. The worry has brought more worries.

What is your greatest fear right now?

JE: My greatest fear right now is the immaturity with which the Nigerian government is approaching the situation. We watch on the cable TV how, in other countries, vaccines and facemasks are scrutinized for contamination, before being distributed to the people. Here such precautionary measures are not observed.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

JE: I'll encourage a stranger who comes to me for comfort to hold on, and look up to God. He's interested in humans and humanity.

* * * * *

Colin James (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

CJ: When my wife came home from work distraught. She hasn't been back since. She was tested and they lost the results.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

CJ: Maybe be more prepared next time . . .

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

CJ: Yes. That does come out. Concern, affection.



Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

CJ: I don't know of any, the small stuff is still there. I am enjoying deep breathing, cognizant of the respiratory nature of the illness.

What is your greatest fear right now?

CJ: I am somewhat optimistic, hoping it is almost over in a couple of weeks.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

CJ: The old British saying: "Keep calm and carry on."

* * * * *

Sam Knot (France):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

*SK: It was a few days after lockdown began here in France, sometime towards the end of March, and I had to go out to fetch supplies. I don't read the news much, and we are off the road in a very rural area, so all I knew was from chatting to the wife. To begin with, I was faintly amused at having to carry a written "attestation" with my personal details, where & when I had left, what I was going out for, etc. The weather was suitably apocalyptic, too, curtain after curtain of rain rent by my windscreen. It was even more quiet on the roads than usual, and there were special instructions on sandwich boards outside the shops: **Maximum 8 People at a Time; Keep a Minimum of 1 Metre's Distance from Each Other; Follow the Sense of Circulation.** Plastic gloves, face-masks, and shop-holders behind sneeze-screens.*

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

SK: Anything good might come out of anything for an optimist like me! But I see that as realism as much as anything—whatever comes out of anything has to do with what we put into it, be that a creative endeavor or reconstruction in the aftermath of some kind of natural disaster. I relate to this global event through the lens of my own personal experiences of sickness. Being forced to stop, slow down, have a break—well, this is always an opportunity for reflection.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

SK: Honestly, it's business as usual here, apart from the fact that my wife is working from home more often (all the time at the minute). We're good eco-conscious hippies anyway, so we already do our shopping in bulk. And there is so much work with the land at this time of year that having more hands on it is welcome. If anything I feel a little less isolated than usual! I rarely see anyone apart from my wife, the horses and wild things, and the lady at the farm shop—so knowing everyone is somewhat in the same boat as me is actually weirdly comforting.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

SK: This time of year is full of grace. One windy early spring day, working outside with my wife, tripping her up so we both fell into the grass together. There is no wind down there, and you can feel a subtle warmth

emanating from the earth now, where before there was always a bit of cold to bite your fingers. So we take some time just lying here, sheltered in the grass like this.

What is your greatest fear right now?

*SK: It is my belief that, despite the rather tortured route we take to learning, we **are** learning. There will come a time when we start to get it more right than wrong, a time when we will no longer do something just because it is the cheap or easy way to do it, but will undertake all our endeavors as the wonderfully imperfect beings we are, as opportunities to learn about life and celebrate beauty, especially that of the unlikely. My greatest fear now would be that it is possible to lose even the hope of or belief in our learning.*

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

SK: "If you come to me for comfort, you get a hug and a hot chocolate. Words can wait."

* * * * *

Jimmy Heffernan (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

JH: I was first fully awakened to the gravity of the crisis when the NBA basketball season was suspended for three months. I am a sports fan, and by this point just about all sports seasons and events have been indefinitely suspended or canceled. At the time of the NBA suspension, things had not really ramped up yet to the pitch they are now, and that was a real wake-up call. That was the point at which I began to understand the seriousness of this whole thing.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

JH: I think the American people have an opportunity to see the bigger picture, and to do some introspective thinking about our system and the reality of the political establishment. If ever there was an opportunity for introspection, this is it. Do I think Americans will actually react that way? Probably not.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

JH: Well, my family and I are the same as ever. This crisis hasn't really changed anything for our relationships. So I can't say anything is really different. We've always been there for each other, and still are.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

JH: The crisis has not taught me anything I didn't already entertain, and my life, despite the chaotic milieu, is largely the same. I cannot say I have had any unusual moments of grace.

What is your greatest fear right now?

JH: My greatest fear is for all the people who will lose their jobs and their savings. We are very probably entering a deep recession or a depression, and some experts have said unemployment could go above 25%. GDP growth is roughly -25% for this quarter, so we're in real trouble as a society. I fear deeply for everyone who is going to run out of options, and there will be a lot of them.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

JH: Some people will be inconsolable after all is said and done. I just hope as many people as possible can be as unscathed as possible, because our socioeconomic picture is quite bleak right now. I would like to tell someone: "don't worry, everything will get back to normal." But I just don't think that's the case.

* * * * *

Leia Friedman (Costa Rica):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

LF: My partner and I have been fortunate enough to wait out this first pandemic experience in Costa Rica. After we arrived in the country, news of the virus made international headlines, with more and more grave news every day. I remember feeling worried and indulging that worry by reading the most intense articles that came across my newsfeed, such as the decision-making process Italian doctors were using to choose who would get a respirator and who would not. Even still, these articles seemed more like something I would read in a dystopian science fiction novel than my actual reality. The moment I knew the pandemic was real was when I checked my email and our flight home had actually been cancelled.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

LF: I hope for a radical change to our healthcare system: expanded options for people to work from home; more ethical safety restrictions on animal agriculture worldwide; & increased attention to, and resources for, ending poverty and hunger and income inequality. If we can bring the world to a standstill over a virus, surely we can make movements toward ending sex trafficking, slavery, and the conditions in sweatshop tech factories in China, where they have installed nets outside the windows, and asked people to sign forms saying they won't kill themselves.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

LF: We spend the morning tending to the fields, the garden, and the property. Chores might include watering the garden, weeding, picking off dead or wilting leaves and feeding it to the chickens, emptying the compost, picking up horse poop to sift into powder for the garden, stealing cow manure from the neighbor's farm to feed to the worms in our vermicompost, seeding new plants in trays, transplanting, direct seeding the field, tending the occasional burn pile, playing “stick” with the dogs (it's like fetch, except they don't bring the stick back). The fields are planted now, with corn, sesame, sweet potato, yuca, peanuts, yampi (a Costa Rican tuber), squash, hibiscus, and more.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

LF: During this pandemic, I find myself connecting with my ancestors as I work the land and offer gratitude for the bounty of food she gives us. I swim in the river every day, to help me cool down, clean the dirt and sweat off my body, and wash away the remains of unresolved emotions. I lay in the hammock in the morning and watch the birds flit and glide across the sky: toucans, falcons, finches. Working in the garden is a learning experience, both of how to garden and how to live. Plants are great teachers and healers, if I am open to their lessons. The wild and perennial foods that grow abundantly and freely all around us keep us well.

What is your greatest fear right now?

LF: The drastic changes of these times may be bringing up all kinds of fears and attachments you didn't understand the nature of, or didn't know you had before, until now. Imagine this time as a turning of the compost. The richness is being unearthed and brought into light. It is a fertile time to observe and learn. We can sow seeds of change, and nurture them, and pray for them, and be nourished by them when they come to fruition. Our ancestors are behind us, willing us to go on existing.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

LF: I don't want to try to give words of comfort or inspiration to people who are actually suffering from this pandemic while I do yoga, eat papayas, and play with the dogs. However, I can offer wisdom that applies to difficult psychedelic experiences, and I think it applies here as well. Pain is a teacher, if we are ready to learn. Some of the most challenging experiences come from inside of us, not outside of us. This time offers the chance to be with our minds, to witness our emotions, and to hold space for them to arise and pass away in their own time.

* * * * *

Tamara Miles (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

TM: When the college I teach at decided to close the campus to students, faculty, and most staff for weeks, perhaps months.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

TM: Yes, people are reaching out to others more. I am reaching out more, having more time for longer conversations, catching up, responding to others’ art and writing, etc. Also, I understand that many of us have started gardening, which is great for self-sustenance and appreciation of the effort it takes to grow food—but also, for the pleasure of seeing things grow.



How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

TM: We eat a meal or two together, sitting down, per day. We lie around, cuddle, talk more, work in the garden together, bring each other cups of tea. We did these things before but, when there is more time for relaxing, we have even more opportunities for sharing.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

*TM: Yes. I have started writing a blog called **Church in the Greenhouse** about finding spiritual growth in a sacred green space, and about whatever else is on my mind. I have also witnessed kindness, and that always brings grace to my door.* [Editor’s Note: This blog’s contents are featured later in this issue.]

What is your greatest fear right now?

TM: My greatest fear is that I will somehow squander this incredible experience of being home for so long (which has never happened before except when my daughter was a baby), and which may not happen again for a very long time. I’ve always said, “If I had the time. . .” But that’s the fear I’m hiding behind instead of the real biggest fear, which is that someone I love will get the virus. I have already one friend get terribly sick with it, for weeks. She is finally recovering, but will require months of healing for her lungs.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

TM: I would say, “In this moment, there is an opportunity for sharing our hearts if we cannot join our hands. What do you think you need most at this time? It might help to have someone listen, and for you to speak fully.”

* * * * *

Timothy Vilgiate (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

TV: Not so much a moment but a gradual build up to the realization. I had taken time off to go visit a school in Illinois, and so I was out for three days or so. I hadn’t followed news about the virus too closely at that point, though I was aware of it. Late February, a friend from Austin who I’d had breakfast with attempted to instill a sense of the seriousness of the incoming virus in me. It concerned me, but I was still not entirely sure if he was exaggerating things. The sense of impending danger began to build over the course of this trip to Illinois, as I

made my way through the airports and then the trains. My fiancée texted me from back in Colorado, urging me to be careful. On the way back, I heard in the news that an employee at the airport I was landing at tested positive for COVID-19. I struggled to leave the airport without touching anything, washing my hands with Purell four or five times before I got to the exit. Heading back to work the next day at my local elementary school, the superintendent announced that our school would be closing at least until the start of April. Even then, it still took a while for it to fully sink in. I was still finding myself waking up in the morning worried that I was missing work, for a few weeks after that point.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

TV: The virus certainly calls attention to deeper systematic sicknesses in the body politic: the dependence of our supply chains on underpaid and exploited farm workers, truck drivers, and grocery store employees, among others; the inefficiencies of relying on market forces to determine who deserves access to housing, food, and healthcare; the underlying fragilities of the economy exposed by how many people are unable to pay rent or to buy groceries; and the consequences of poor leadership at the highest levels of government. Maybe it can change the way society as a whole sees people in the service and retail industry, and rally support for stronger protections and better pay for them. The crisis may also cause people to be more receptive to deeper structural reforms and more humanizing economic policies. The crisis has also required many to use web conferencing and to turn to online platforms for social connection, grocery delivery, and entertainment more than before; maybe this crisis will cement the place of digital technology in our daily lives, and change the way that schools and businesses work. Still, nothing is inevitable. People actually need to work towards solutions together, and ensure an equitable and just outcome.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

TV: Every afternoon we sit out on our porch and watch the sunset. Then we take turns cooking or baking cookies, and watch Netflix together before going to bed. My fiancée is an essential employee and so she still goes to work; I try to keep up with chores around the house while she's gone, and to not let writing, reading, and video games suck up all of my time.



Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

TV: A beautiful grey tomcat came by our porch one afternoon. He had no collar, and hadn't been neutered. It was cold out and he wanted to come inside, but our cats Molly and Pedro would have none of that. They camped out by the sliding door to defend themselves from the intruder. I got the cat a saucer of milk and, when my fiancée got home, she made him a bed out of a shoebox. We didn't see him again for another two weeks, when he started coming back every night after dark, expecting food and attention from us. We named him Cinderblock. He was a sweet cat, and we wanted very much to adopt him, but our lease would only let us have two pets. I called my friend who worked at animal shelter to see if they could take him, and reached out to my parents to see if they had room for a new cat. Eventually, my friend advised me to bring the cat to the local Humane Society, and so the next day, when the cat came around, I donned gloves and a big coat and scooped the cat into a carrier so I could take it in. Pedro still camps out by the screen door every night in order to keep a look out for Cinderblock.

What is your greatest fear right now?

TV: That as summer approaches, our ground floor apartment will be overrun with ants, spiders, and other insects. We've already found some ants and I don't think we are tidy enough to prevent a total infestation. Although perhaps Molly and Pedro will enjoy hunting the ants.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

TV: Well, it would depend. I'd probably need to listen to them first and see if there was anything I could do to help.

* * * * *

Kassandra Soulard (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt “real” to you personally?

KS: I think it started to feel real when I heard that several people who attended a conference in Boston at the end of February were sick. We started working from home on March 11, and not going out on weekends, even before our governor issued a stay-at-home advisory. It got even more real when I learned that my uncle back in Colorado had it, and had to be brought up to a bigger hospital to get the care he needed. I work for an organization that supports people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, including a residential program, and it felt pretty real today when I learned that three staff members and three residents (out of 43) have tested positive.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

KS: A couple things come to mind:

- 1. At least temporarily, less pollution.*
- 2. While it seems to have taken a pandemic to show companies and schools that many things can be done virtually/remotely, people with disabilities of all kinds have been fighting for this level of accessibility and inclusiveness for years. I hope that people will still have the option to work/study/obtain services virtually when this is all over.*

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

KS: I think we are being especially patient and attentive to each other. We have also been mindful to stick to as many of our healthy routines as possible (exercising and healthy eating). I have been checking in with my mom daily, just to make sure everyone there is doing well.

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

KS: I think it's important to still find beauty in the world. I find grace and calm in nature, whether it be the green friends we have in our house and outside, or the fact that it is springtime in New England and the birds, daffodils, and squirrels don't stop due to a pandemic. I don't know if it's grace, but I've been touched to the bone by stories of healthcare providers risking their wellbeing to show up and take care of people, and still have the decency to hold a dying patient's hand while he dies because his family can't be there.

What is your greatest fear right now?

KS: I will put aside all the conspiracy fears that float in my mind and say my greatest fear is that one of us or someone we know and love will get sick and have to be in the hospital alone.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

KS: It sounds cliched but I think we are all in this together, and we will get through it together.

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard (US):

Describe the moment when this global pandemic felt "real" to you personally?

RS: On March 11, Kassi came home from work (I was jobless at the time), & I realized that we could not safely leave our house anymore. Even more so when I got a job, and had to go out to do a drug test, and again to do a citizenship verification. Traveling on the city subway into Boston, everyone in masks, keeping distance, was fucking creepy.

Do you think anything good might come of this crisis?

RS: We learn better that we need each other, like it or not, and we should grok the world better than we do.

How are you and your loved ones tending each other while sheltered in place?

RS: Eating well, working out, trying to tend each other kindly. Patience, humor. Hangin' tough, like NKOTB :)

Despite the crisis and its many worries, have you experienced a moment of grace during it?

RS: Working out in the yard, preparing for spring and summer. Reading about the brave doctors and nurses who risk their lives for others. Unbelievably wonderful in such a dark time.

What is your greatest fear right now?

RS: My greatest fear is that the man who caused this to be so bad, Trump, will not suffer the consequences of his monumental stupidity in November. He deserves to be defeated in humiliating numbers.

What words of comfort would you give to a stranger?

RS: You can make it through this. Follow the guidance of the doctors. Tend yourself and others. You are strong enough to survive and show others how.

* * * * *

ONLY YOU



CAN PREVENT COVID-19

STAY HOME - SOCIALLY DISTANCE - SAVE A LIFE

Lindsey Rose McGrath



Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Notes from New England

*"Please accept this ragged purse
of high notes."*

The following continues the series originally called Notes from New England, begun in issue 24-25 (Winter 1998), then revived in issue 59 (October 2006) as Notes from the Northwest, & appearing since issue 75 (October 2010) under its original title. It is intended as a gathering-place for observations of various lengths upon the world around me. It will be culled, like much of my writing, from my notebooks, & perhaps these thoughts will be expanded upon sometimes as well.

Dream Raps, Volume Nine

*"I tell you, there are more worlds,
and more doors to them,
than you will think of in many years!"
— George MacDonald, Lilith, 1895.*

I stand in a room surrounded by frozen rainbow waterfalls on all sides. I peer deep into those waterfalls with my eyes closed, & something compels me to open my mind's eye, but I still can't see anything. Something compels me to reach my finger out into the unseeable before me, & draw a circle, big enough to climb through as I push it in.

And I climb through this hole where there is a circle, & there is a room, & there are waterfalls' frozen rainbow splendor. And I find myself sitting in a city, underground city, on a train platform. Look down, there's a notebook in my hand, of course; my hand holding a black pen, of course; scribbling away, of course.

* * * * *

Draw a Circle in the Air

So here's how you do it. Draw a circle in the air with your finger. Choose carefully which finger. It will have an effect on the result. As you draw the circle with the well-chosen finger, concentrate on a where, & on a when, to create a door in the air before you.

The first time I did this, I remember it was the second night after I had moved to my hovel in ZombieTown. Sitting amidst my boxes of books & notebooks & vinyl LP records. But I had just been taught, & wanted to try. I passed through the door & came to a newsstand, on an empty city street. I tried to remember which where & when I had been concentrating on, but I could not remember.

I walk up to the newsstand, & see that all of the periodicals on its outside racks are filled with pictures. No words, none of them. There are sporting magazines, food magazines, fashion magazines, automobile magazines, lots & lots of pictures. No words, none at all.

*I walk into the newsstand, & go behind the unmanned counter. I crawl among the magazines, in sloppy piles on the floor, scrounging for words, finding none. Then I see that there's a trail of wrapped little candies on the ground. They're glowing a bit, & they lead me to a strange tunnel. I crawl through the tunnel for what seems like a long time, following the little candies, crunching them as I go along. They seem to be helpful little candies, get deep inside me, & then I start to feel like, **OK, I can do this**. They start to glow, & I begin to **hmmmmmm**.*

*Finally, I come out of the strange tunnel, & I stand up & brush myself off, finishing the last little candy, the last **crunch**. I look around & I'm in a glowing hallway. There are strange pictures on the wall. They remind me of the pictures on the magazines I'd seen in the newsstand. There's pictures of dashing sporting heroes & swift automobiles & lovely fashion models & beautiful banquets.*

*I roam down this glowing hallway &, turning a corner, I suddenly come to a white-faced pink cat radio on a small low table. I notice that my **hmmming** & the radio's **hmmming** are becoming completely the same. We are **hmmming** together. Smile, walk on.*

*Then I come to a pretty turquoise-eyed lady, sitting on a comfortable divan. She bids me to join her with a gesture & a smile, & I do. I see in her lap a couple of comfortable Creatures, a rooster & a little froggy. She shows me next to her a table with her magic lantern machine. It projects pictures upon the wall. The pictures look like the magazine covers again. **What is connecting all these things?** I don't know.*

Who is that dashing sporting figure? I don't know.

Who is that famous actress? I don't know.

What is the make & model of that fine automobile? I don't know.

Who enjoyed that delicious-looking meal? I don't know.

She resumes the story she is telling, that I guess I unknowingly interrupted. But I begin to doze in the divan, with the nice lady & her friendly Creatures. I begin to dream. And I suppose it would not surprise you that, when I wake, I'm where I began, & the circle I drew in the air before me is fading from view.

* * * * *

It's a Puzzle I've Been Working On, Ten Years or More

It's a puzzle I've been working on for these ten years or more, & I still haven't solved it. Began one night when I was drowsing in my hovel in ZombieTown, been living there awhile. Sitting on my broken spring mattress, enjoying a big bowl of ChocoSmax (*Them's the Fax!*), & watching my favorite all-night TV show, *TripTown*, on my black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. Then this commercial came on with this doctor who says he restores anything, & I thought, *wow, you can restore anything, can you?*

I started talking to my Dü-Mónt television, or maybe my Dü-Mónt television started talking back to me a little. Sometimes I have conversations with my black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, yes, indeedy, I'm not too proud to say.

And the doctor said to me: *it was ten years ago or more that I was visiting this commune near Iconic Square. I would party, a lot of friendly people, Saturday afternoon in the universe, a beautiful one. There was this big house that didn't seem quite finished but had lots of room. And there was a big backyard, with a long table, like it was made out of a plank on logs with chairs of all sorts, metal & wood & brick, plastic. Everybody was*

gathered round this long, long table, sharing a meal.

The old man, there's always an old man at these communes, with the long tables, unfinished houses, he was bearded, sharp, together. He was praising things, some in English, some in other languages, I think at points he was whistling his praises and maybe even letting out a cackle for one or two.

*When he sat down, everyone smiled at him, pleased. Everyone joined in the meal. Lots of rutabega-~~&~~-mushroom soup all around. I was sitting with a couple of friendly guys, ~~&~~ they were telling me about something called **electric orange juice**. And they said to me, **you know what?** With **electric orange juice**, you can restore **anything!** They urged me have a cup.*

*So, alright then, I had a cup, ~~&~~ that is when I began about my mission of restoring things. From that day, that sunny afternoon, that unfinished house, that big back yard, that long table, those many smiling faces. They weren't all people, what do you think? At some point we were all **bmmmmmming** together, laughing, telling stories in many a tongue ~~&~~, somehow, when we held hands ~~&~~ paws ~~&~~ what-not, me smiling ~~&~~ merry, sipping that **electric orange juice**, every story made sense.*

So when I tell you, young man in your ZombieTown hovel, on that broken spring mattress, that I can restore things, you'd better listen! You better pay heed!

And his commercial ended there. No 800 number to call, no address to write to. No *but wait!* *There's more!* pitch. He just sorta nodded at me, no smile, & *TripTown* came back on. And I suppose I've been trying to puzzle out this doctor & his message these ten years or more.

* * * * *

Yesterday Didn't Begin Very Well

The world's been overrun by some kind of horror, & everyone flees, but most are killed. I wake up with someone in this dark half-fallen down housebarn, a stranger who became a companion along the way. Yesterday morning, we found ourselves trapped in an old factory, vast, no escape, going ever deeper in, hiding in corners, no shadow dark enough for what was coming.

And I had in my backpack something that is strangely more precious than anything else. It is a small, insulated pack, gray colored, a little stained. There's a paisley sticker on it that says, *Have a better tomorrow!* Inside this insulated little pack is a **cube** of ice cream. Cherry vanilla. I think it might be the last one in the world. And I don't wanna give it up for nobody. I have some idea that it will be important at some point. *I'm* certainly not going to dig in.

Deep in the warehouse, we find a ladder. My companion climbs up first. It goes up & up & up & up, ~~&~~ up ~~&~~ up ~~&~~ up. This ladder is impossibly tall but, I realize, after several hours of climbing, we are far from that warehouse danger. We just keep climbing.

I remember back before the world ended, there were people who were called *asexual*, & I think my companion is that way. She seems to love all, but not any in an erotic way. It's calming. It's helped me become someone better than I was, someone better than I ever would have been had the world not ended.

Arrived finally to this housebarn. We're both sitting up now, awake from exhaustion naps. She looks

at me & says, *My dream was among living metaphors, everything literal & symbolic. Grass, soil, people, all literal & symbolic.*

I laugh & say, *I can't match that. I had a dream that I had a pen-sized vacuum & I was chasing after a brilliantly colored cockroach along a wall. Then I catch it, but then it talks me out of vacuuming it. I don't know how. It's a fast talking cockroach.*

She laughs too, then says, *Is it still safe?* I check the pack, the fake bottom where we keep it. **Cube** of cherry vanilla, sealed up, safe as anything.

She stands up. I stand up. We get ready for a better day.

* * * * *

I Have an Apartment, Couple of Large Rooms

My beloved & I are hosting the Jellicle Literary Guild at a long table in our new two-room apartment. It's a full crowd, all the friends of old. Poetry, guitars, lotta laughs. At one point, I want a photo of everyone to put on the cover of *The Cenacle*. Someone ducks out of it, though. Someone always does. Eventually they drift from the long table, now more wanting to socialize on the old beautiful green couch, with the lovely crimson & electric blue blankets draped on it. I'm wondering, as I usually do at these events, *how can more writing be shared tonight?*

But people are talking now, losing interest. It was a good time, but they soon have all left. This new apartment has two long rooms, more than my old hovel by a country mile. I realize I've not really gone into the other room much. The door to it is hard to jiggle open, even when unlocked. But I do, it's time. Bring a flashlight too, since the light fixtures are all empty of light bulbs. On my beloved's to-do list. The two rooms are perpendicular to each other, so I am entering from the middle of this long room to the front end of that one.

There are bookcases that I don't remember from seeing it the first time. They are mostly empty, have random, dusty, fairly uninteresting titles, like the kind a thrift store might not even sell. My beloved joins me too, as do a few sniffing curious Creatures. MeZmer the White Bunny, Bellla the bloo-&-pink piglet. I wonder how we will fill up those mostly empty bookcases? We don't have enough books of our own, back in the other room.

We pass by many larger & larger bookcases, ever higher ceilings. For a moment I think of my dreams of the Attic. The books on the larger bookcases we come to seem nicer & nicer.

We keep walking & walking, past brown walls of maps & stacks of film canisters. One map looks like it depicts the Ancient Six Islands, when they were clustered together. One canister of film is labeled **RemoteLand – GateKeeper Copy Only**. But it's empty. Alas.

Then suddenly, no door, we come outside to a cement bridge. Follow it across & come to a very crowded old-timey-looking bookstore. There's also a Mulronie's Original Genuine Gourmet Space Pirate Burgers! with its crazy neon pink sign.

We cross the bridge back to our endless room. I worry there's no actual door to close off our library from here. I worry about how we're going to fill in those bookcases. Even the many shiny-covered Secret



Books we share with the Creatures are pretty small in all.

As we are returning, I stop & look at a little book with an odd title, *Wyrd Poems from 1928*. I pick a page to read to my beloved & these Creatures:

*I see something. I see my face across time.
Me & not me. I exist multiply across space & time. Time is not linear.
And I think, no, this is not just me, this is others,
many others, who exist multiply through space & time, throughout all of history &
if that's possible, maybe history could be changed,
deaths could be averted.*

She listens, finger on chin, smiles. The Creatures sniff twice. I turn the pages & read another to them:

*Art she lives & mourns & bores
& wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
& skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel stretching far.
Art & I love you. Art & I dance you.
Art & you spit me, & smile. Art & you gesture me near,
nearer, a breath's closest . . . Art, you gesture me on!*

I think they like that one too. I put the volume back, & we walk on. There's a door I notice among the bookcases. It's not a very remarkable door, half-hidden. Locked. I think it leads to the hotel next door. There is music coming through it though. A man's lovely, low voice, singing over & over again: *loss can be gain, loss can be gain, loss can be gain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain . . .*

* * * * *

Drowsing in My Hovel

Deep in wintertime ZombieTown. Like most hovels, it is a single room. It is, however, a *high-class hovel*, because it has a full window. So I can watch the snow falling outside, & the wind blowing, & the icy patterns forming on the window.

It does not have heat, per se, though I have a kinda-sorta, after a fashion, electrical heater. It operates on batteries & a crank. I sometimes wonder if this heater that I'm using is offering me more heat in just the cranking, because you have to crank real hard, & *then* the heat lasts for a few minutes, & *then* it dies, & *then* you have to add more batteries.

Well, it's tough. I have lovely blankets, a crimson one & an electric blue one. I also tend to walk around my hovel a lot, such as you can walk around a hovel, with many shirts & pants on, & shoes & socks. I wear my hat & gloves too. But it's *my* high-class hovel, one full window. Better than how I was living back in Wyrd Godd Town.

So I'm watching the gridiron match (*the football match* as they call it in big-time Elliptical City) on my D  -M  nt black & white television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. I begin to doze, perhaps to dream. Rouse myself after every quarter of the gridiron match to crank & crank & crank, *crank & crank & crank* my heater. The snow has been falling & falling all weekend. I've watched it pile higher, up to &

halfway over my full window.

Come halftime, I change the channel with the stick I made to do that (with electrical tape, so not to get shocked), & drift into a movie. They seem to alternate somehow, mix together. Sometimes it almost seems as though the stars of the gridiron are starring in the movie. Only it's a movie about a bank robbery, not about a gridiron match.

The bank robber is, I think, the hotshot rookie golden-haired tight end in the gridiron match, anointed on this earth to win champ-eeen-ship after champ-eeen-ship. But he's a bank robber. He travels from town to town, robbing & sending money back to his family.

Now you could ask: *what kind of family is he sending it back to?* And I don't know if you could say exactly how he is related to all these family members. Seems like they are all just folks he knew along the way, from his boyhood on, who ended up with him in a hovel in the White Woods. Kind of a *grand hovel*, in my opinion. They have a fireplace, so they're *off the charts* in terms of hovels.

Anyway, they live in this grand hovel far away, in the White Woods, & he sends them money. He travels to each town whose bank he robs carrying a leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag. It's very stylish. He found it at a thrift store when his robbery travels first began. It seemed like a good way to transport his ill-gotten loot.

And now he has a new partner, a sort of jittery blonde woman. I couldn't exactly say how he picked her up. I think there was a fumble during that part of the movie so I missed how they met. What happens next is that he comes to this new town, with the jittery woman, & they descend into the main street in the center of town by this escalator. Now you could ask: *how is there an escalator in the center of this town?* But that's how they arrive to it, by an escalator that they rode down, & now they're in the center of town looking for the bank to rob.

The jittery woman is jittering, tugging at her hair, uncertain, mumbling about **cubes** of ice cream? But she plays a key role in the bank robberies. See there's a gaggle of cops over there, laughing in front of that bakery, as is not surprising? Meanwhile, the bank robber & his new partner are walking right straight into the bank that they finally espy across the street, yelling, directing, looking for the money.

It's kind of a strange bank, though, like both a bank & an auto garage. It's a weird little town. They seem to do things differently here, no doubt. The bank robber & his partner are in the auto garage, but the mechanics very friendly send them along to the bank part. The bank robber goes in there with his leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag, & his jittery partner, & *that's* when her usefulness comes into play.

He nods to her three times, & then raises his nose once, & she **SCREAMMMMMMMNNMMMMMS** but much *much* longer. She keeps going. She does not stop. She *screams* & *screams* & *screams*, & her *screams* are so loud, & so disorientating, that no one in the town, including the cops, is able to move or think. They just drop to the ground, & cover their ears, & moan in pain. He finally finds the money, floating in a pool of black water, possibly motor oil, & it takes him a while to pluck it out, dollar by dollar.

Then, when the leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag is filled, he grabs her hand, shakes her a little, she's still in her what you might call **screaming** fugue, & they rush through the scared & paralyzed town, & grab that escalator, & up they go. Now you could ask: *to where?*

Aren't you paying attention? *To the next town, of course.*

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Wyrddodd Town

It had been years that I have been away. The memories of it confused & conflicting. And I never thought I'd go back to Wyrddodd Town, but here I was, in one of the old raggedy seats, on this sort of rickety train to Wyrddodd Town. Train was crowded, didn't used to be. Lot of folks with me going to Wyrddodd Town.

Almost seemed more like a TV show this time than a profoundly different reality, but everybody on the train was friendly enough. I stood up & started telling the story about what put me on this train years ago, riding *away* from Wyrddodd Town. And about who I was going back to find.

I had an office job, I say, where sometimes I ended up with some or no clothes on. Never knew how. One time, I got some kind of awful green stuff on me. Half-nekkid, covered in green stuff. I won't say what kind of stuff, because there are ladies & gentlemen here in the audience on this train to Wyrddodd Town.

So I got home to my rooming house. It was like this vast dormitory. Why was I living there? I had an office job. Weren't things hard enough? It's late, very late. I'd worked late hours & came to the huge laundry room. It's busy, so busy, 3, 4 in the morning, every washer & dryer is being used. How vast was this dormitory anyway?

But finally I manage to find one free, & I put in my jeans, covered in the awful green stuff (I won't say what kind of stuff) & while I'm waiting for them to wash, I walk back to my room. There's this woman visiting. I'm not sure how I know her, I'm not really sure who she is, but she visits quite often. This time she looks at me, in my boxer shorts with the crazy laughing pandy bears all over them, & just laughs. Not another word.

I don't quite remember her name, never quite do, but she brings me books. You see, somewhere along the way, I showed up at the library one time, half-nekkid. Had a problem on the town escalator. Got stuck halfway. Well, anyhow, that was the end of my privileges there. They couldn't have that kind of thing going on.

*She worked at the library. Maybe she was sympathetic to me from then on. She saw I meant no harm. So she brought me books. Strange books, I never know what. Novels, biographies, textbooks, technical manuals, lots of true crime books. I find it hard to return **Aftermath** by Cosmic Early & **Nazi Jailbait Bitch** back to her.*

*Soon she always had to leave, to take care of her grandma, as she called her. She'd say, **Nice visiting with you but I have to go take care of my grandma.***

I nod. This is how these visits usually ended. They're friendly enough. But then I think of the Attic up there, that I've visited so many times in dreams. I think I could show this lady, my friend the librarian, in thanks for all these books she brings me, this wonderful endless Attic. We could cluster dream to there.

I don't say anything though. Maybe next time I'll get up my gumption. I'm kind of shy, especially in my weird boxer briefs, jeans washing, & half-nekkid at work. Things are just unstable, this dormitory, I don't even know if I belong here. I'm trying to work all this out. Maybe taking this lady librarian friend to the Attic is just a little too much.

So she's about to leave & then I notice, & she notices, that there's something by the door of my room. It's a

*suitcase, & she remembers, oh yeah, & she brings it over to my old mattress with the thin pillow & the lovely crimson & electric blue blankets. She opens it up & it's a suitcase full of weird masks, handcrafted. They kind of terrify me. The noses seem to go on too long or too multiply. The eyes sink deep & pierce hard, & they're just disturbing. I say, **Did you make those?***

*She laughs & replies, **No, no, my friend. My grandma, Nana Wordsley, made them, when I was little. She made them all the time. She'd sit at our front window, & she'd watch people pass by, & she'd say to me, get me my materials! & I knew that she was going to make a mask out of what she'd seen, those people passing by. And I just thought I'd bring them by & show them to you.***

*Well, now I'm careful, & I want to say they're pretty or beautiful, but then I accidentally say, **They're terrifying, lady librarian!** She laughs & says, **Of course they're terrifying! My grandma said the world is terrifying! And the only way you can deal with this terrifying world is to make a terrifying response. This is how she did it! Don't you understand?***

So I'm thinking about this for a moment when there's a sound of hecklers out my window. They're shouting & yelling. I think it's something about me being half-nekkid at work, or maybe something about my jeans, I don't know. There's a pounding at my door, which I'd shut to look at Grandma Nana's terrifying facemasks, & there's someone out there freaking out, trying to get in. And I don't know what's going on—

someone on the train to Wyrddodd Town stands up finally, grabs my shoulder, hugs me, tight, & I realize, *oh, it's OK. I'm on the train to Wyrddodd Town, but I'm not in that situation I was telling them all about.* And I thank him, & a few others stand up, & they hug me too. It seems like it's going to be OK, at least for the moment.

Because bad things happened in that dormitory right after, & if they hadn't stopped me I would've kept talking till I told them all, & I don't think it would've helped anybody if I had. I think it's time to just settle back in this raggedy seat on this sort of rickety train, & just enjoy the rest of the ride in my return back to Wyrddodd Town. *Try to find the Lady Librarian? Maybe have a better tomorrow?*

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Some Say That The *Hmmmmmm*

Some say that the *Hmmmmmm* is like the veins of the world. One can trace & follow their patterns, & there are so many secrets to be discovered. I've been down among the roots of the **Great Tree at the Heart of the World** for a long time now, & sometimes I forget there is a world above & beyond the roots of the **Great Tree**.

I travel, of course, with Creatures. They are with me here amongst the roots of the **Great Tree**. The two bloo-eyed Kittees, Jonny & Jonny, & their Friend Fish, Murmur, drive me in their famous Boat-Wagon. The blue-and-pink piglet Bellla, with her tricky smile & merry eyes, is with us too. She & I sit in the back seat of the Boat-Wagon, all of us always buckled in. *Safety first!*

When we encounter individuals of various kinds, Bellla likes it when I find a lull in the conversation & pull her out suddenly from the shirt pocket in my green plaid jacket, & reveal her, *out of the blue-and-pink*, as it were. Some are shocked, some amused.

Occasionally I remember that, somewhere back there, is my sleeping self. This is my *hmmmming* vein,

from here back to that world up there, out there. But I don't miss any of it when I'm here. I don't miss anything. I have found many answers to the greatest question, *Why is there something instead of nothing?* And let me tell you, there are *ever more* answers to be found!

* * * * *

Deeper, Stranger, More Complex

Here goes. Like a recurring dream, this feels like familiar light, anger, revenge, emptiness, loss. I find myself half-awake, with my beloved, in a strange hotel. Seems like it's a mile high. Wasn't our apartment next door?

Half awake, I look at her lying close next to me, & I say *I love you* very softly, & she says, *shhhhhhh*.

I can't imagine why she would say that at that moment, but then she nudges me a little bit, & I look over, & I see the other two people sleeping in this bed. A man & a woman. The woman half-nekkid. I sit right up, stir us all.

And my beloved says, *you were sound asleep. They came & said these two had nowhere else to go. The rooms are full, all booked. They said if we didn't say yes, we'd have to pay more.*

I nod. *What else is there to do?* Elliptical City can be like that.

* * * * *

Maris Monkey

*This is how it began on that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**. It began with Maris Monkey. Were those famous Space Heroes, Mulronie the Space Pirate & Commander Cacklebird, flying together in the Commander's **Space Tugboat (TOOT! TOOT!)**, sent to help Maris Monkey or was Maris Monkey sent to help those famous Space Heroes?*

*Anyway, something went wrong. It wasn't intentional, but you see when Maris Monkey came aboard that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**, when she was docked at Outer Space City, she brought demons on board. And the demons possessed the officers of the **Victoriana**. It was then no longer a peaceful starship exploring the galaxies & the universes & the stars & the quasars & the pulsars. It was a warship.*

The demons directed a bloody killing swathe across the eons. Each time they encountered another craft, or landed on a new planet, no matter how they were greeted, with kindness or paranoia or suspicion, they always took it the worst possible way. Every encounter was a threat, a danger that had to be destroyed—

I look up from my book, at the lovely turquoise eyes of my beloved in this strange old dusty Red Dog Diner. *I notice that a long-tailed insect has pricked her finger & entered partway. The rest elongates into a strange being that now lives in a tiny fenced-off garden on the table at which we sit. It drinks & grows fatter & fatter, & I try to smash it but can't. It gets so fat it looks like it will explode.*

Snap! Snap! Snap! I wake up, she's OK. It's just the dusty Red Dog Diner. I look back down at my book, & I see that *the Monkey & the Space Heroes have taken charge of the situation. The Monkey extended a long tendril into each officer of that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**, & sucked out the demons, spat them*

on the floor. Those famous Space Heroes gathered these demons in a wicker basket with a solid top, & brought this to a quarantined area of the starship.

*The famous Space Heroes receive many thanks, & then travel on in their **Space Tugboat (TOOT! TOOT!)**. The Monkey declares to the officers that she will work with the demons in the quarantined area until they are ready to offer both an apology, & a willingness to turn another way.*

The Monkey I've been reading about for so long enters the quarantined area, & the officers wonder what will be her fate.

* * * * *

I Wonder About the Worldwide Conspiracy

I wonder about the worldwide conspiracy of men, women, events, places, occurrences. These things are not easy to reckon or deduce: *what's real, what's imagined, what's wished for, what's possible*. I don't have any answers, not a one, not yours, not mine, not anyone else's, just a thought to travel through life with a changing set of questions, & a changing set of ideas about those questions.

Is there really a worldwide conspiracy, men, women, events, places, occurrences? Is there any purpose to it? Is it conscious, or is it more instinctual? I've asked you, but will you tell me? Is your set of ideas based on your current set of questions? Are all we have questions & ideas?

I don't know, & I don't know if it's possible to find out. But maybe there's something to all this, to be known, if one reaches one's hand a little further. One looks a little stranger. One listens otherwise.

* * * * *

I'm in an Apartment Lobby, Maybe a Cafe

This little story begins in an apartment lobby, sort of a café. Someone passes me quickly, short man dressed in seven colors. He's going up to see an old friend of mine, who I can't go up to see anymore. Bringing him a bouquet of plastic flowers that jingle.

They come back down, & now my ex-old friend's holding the bouquet. They're both smiling & laughing & telling jokes in a language I can't begin to understand. I don't even know if it's really words. *Whistles? Cackles?*

Anyway, I leave. I take all my bags. I've got a lot of them, & I leave. I walk out into the night, down the street, all the stores strange to me, selling things I don't understand.

But then there's a place with a picture of breakfast food in the window. And a smiling Sun & cool-shaded Moon holding ray of light hands, so I guess it's breakfast all the time. I go on in, sit down at one of the tables, pick up the menu before me, see it has a single picture of breakfast food. *All of it.*

Apparently you order one meal, but it contains everything. You got your *eggs*, you got your *bacon*, you got your *sausage*, you got your *toast*, you got your *pancakes*, you got your *waffles*, many kinds of *sides* & *syrups* to pour on or eat separately. You got your *juice*, you got your *milk*, you got your *coffee*. I'm distracted from my breakfast studies when a man at a nearby table turns to me & smiles, winks his third

eye at me, then gets up & hurries away.

I turn back to my breakfast, just arrived, but then I'm distracted by something else. I have to stand up & leave my many bags & breakfast because there's a noise in the back. I go into the back room & find not a kitchen but just a sort of weird office.

There's several of them there, & I cough, hoping they don't tell me to get out right away. But they don't. They're studying whatever's going on through the back window, through these tiny binoculars they pass back & forth.

And I, *whatever*, I gotta return to my bags & my breakfast. *But they're gone!* Table's cleared, & my bags are moved over near the door. My long woolen overcoat too, yah it's a little long & a little old, drags along the ground a bit, not seen its best days in a while. *But who has? Who comes into a place like this, ends up distracted in the back room/office?*

I grab all my bags, walk outside. I got a few bites of breakfast in there anyway. Look around, & the buildings all around me are folding into themselves, *they're imploding!* I see walls of dust rising & falling.

Why doesn't my friend like me anymore?

* * * * *

I'm Living in One of Those Little Boxes

Imagine a world in which all of your loved ones have been taken away from you, not by tragic death, nor by the variables of the human heart, but by military order, by one man's bitter, raging anger. He'd grown tired of people's love not all being directed toward him, *all of it*, so he separated not just the poor, not just the vulnerable, but *everybody*. Everyone was separated from everyone else.

I live in one of those little boxes, **cubes** people like to call them, where everyone lives now. Six-foot-by-six-foot-by-six-foot. Each of us is allowed three possessions. I have my beat-up & beloved copy of *Aftermath with Additional Appendices & New Dream Fragments* by Cosmic Early. I have my roll. Everyone has a roll. It's a keyboard, you know, rolls up. You unroll it, click the **on** button, & the whole world is there before your eyes, at least what he allows you to see of it. And of course he follows you, or maybe just his algorithms do, I don't know, but the roll is required.

For a long time, I haven't known what to pick as my third item, & then one night I fell asleep & I actually had a dream. I hadn't had a dream in a long time. Those weren't much around either, anymore. They were suppressed, in the food, the water, because they were not about loving him.

But I had a dream anyway, & in this dream a Creature, a White Bunny, comes to me in my **cube**, with her shining eyes, & her wonderfully empathetic face.

She looks at me for a lingering moment with her meZmering eyes, as though we are familiar to one another, or might have been at one time. I shake my head, just a little, sadly, & she turns & hops away. Pauses to wait for me, & I follow. We enter these strangely glowing & beautiful White Woods, as open to the world as my **cube** is closed up tight.

We reach a clearing lit with full moonlight. Shaped like a, um, *temple*? Is that the right word? Though I

sense she's not one to speak the English much often, the White Bunny hops into my grasp & whispers a word in my ear, as I'm waking up, & that's my third possession, because it allows me to return here & many more places, in dreams, any night I wish. *Ha ha ha.*

* * * * *

A Tree Stump in a Clearing in the White Woods

You are in the White Woods, deep in the White Woods, where yet there is no center, nor far edge. You are deep in the White Woods, & you come to a tree stump in a kind of clearing. Not a deliberate clearing, not a random clearing. Shaped like a temple in the full moonlight. *What does that mean?* I don't know.

And there is a tree stump, & it's hollow, yet not empty. It's filled with water. *Rain water?* It hasn't rained. But the water looks fresh, undusted, clear, down to a very dark & ambiguous bottom.

So you look down into this tree stump, but not closely enough. You get down on your hands & knees, & *really* look down deep into this tree stump.

At first, you don't see a thing, not a thing. But then, as you look closer, you see your reflection, not on the surface, but somewhere way down below. *Down deeper in than it seems possible.* It's not that small down there anymore. A memory comes over you, as you look down deep into this tree stump that shouldn't be that deep.

It's an old memory. *Is it yours?* You find yourself holding it, lightly, upon your fingertips, like a many-colored soap bubble. You look into it, & you see a brown plane, vast, empty at first, & then a face you knew long ago, & a sound, a single musical note, but one dear to your heart-bone. *A radio?*

You shudder & begin to cry into this memory, into this stump, in these White Woods, down deep in them, no center, no far edge. You begin to cry great wailing cries, your tears fall into this water, & it begins to release you. *It begins to release you.* But because you are you, & not someone else, it gives you a gift that is for you, & no one else.

You stand, look around, then find in your hand a black pen & a blank piece of paper.

* * * * *

They Say It Was the Old Football Tight End . . .

They say it was the old football tight end who began pushing back against the violence in this town. He was a big man, always been. He had a lot of violence in himself too, spent it out for years on the playing field. Catching passes, knocking guys down. He understood it, in other words, he understood its power & lure & trap. And then one day, he came out of his gated home with a toolbox. First thing he did, he took down the gate, piece by piece, screw by screw. His home was no longer gated.

I live over there a-ways, kind of a party house. I rent the room in the far corner (the side of the house that's *always about* to get finished), bout as big as the bed I sleep in. Many people here have grown bored of the violence in Wyrd Godd Town, & so ignore it. I suppose that's another approach. People wander round in costumes, bathrobes, cheerleader outfits, fur, strange white imp masks, but nobody's happy,

nobody's delighted. *What kind of party house is this anyway?*

But I look through my very tiny window & see the old football tight end doing what he's doing with the gate. I crawl out of my bed/room, walk by the various bored people in their costumes & masks, come outside & follow the old football tight end.

Come to a field, it's never much been used. But he has called many into it, all sorts of smiling people, they're from afar, but they heard his call. Now they're gathered in great crowds. He's ready to address the violence in him, around him, on the football field, & elsewhere. He waves a big hand, leads us all up a hill, urges us all to *gather round & take a look down the other side of that hill.*

And what's down there is so shiny & strange that we're not even sure what it is, but I can tell you this much so far. *It is a lot better* than furred & cheerleader-outfitted & masked but *boring* roommates. And violence everywhere, for that matter.

* * * * *

I wake . . . from something . . . Is it a dream? I don't know . . .

I wake from something, is it a dream? I don't know. I don't know if it's a dream. In it, Bags End was gone. Creature Common was gone. Everything was gone. All felt neutral & still. Calm, but not good. *Was it a dream?* I don't know. I look around. Oh, here I am, *grrroan, sorry*, in my sickness, on my cot next to Outer Space City. *Grrroan. Sorry.*

I'm in a room that is filled almost to the edges with a miniature city. Now in the olden times, a miniature city would have been a model of something bigger. *Grrroan. Sorry.* No, it's all happening down there, in Outer Space City. *Grrroan. Sorry.* It's something in the air here. I have slept in this room too long.

I watch this city from above, with tiny binoculars that I fit on the very edge of my nose. They're doing something down below that just might get all of us out of Outer Space City. It's not a good place. *It's got a good name*, you might say, *so how could it not be a good place?* It's not. It's got demons. It sinks, closer & closer to its demise, every day. Gravities all around are tugging harder at its failing engines.

And yet I look down into that miniature city & I see inventions. I see brilliant geniuses hurrying back & forth. They are building an Outer Space City that will not eventually crash due to the gravities. It will expel the demons, one way or another. And I think: *how do I get down there?* *Grrroan. Sorry.* OK, OK, here's why I'm sick. I've been drinking some of that illegal black market Mi-Nee powder. It's supposed to mini-fy you. It hasn't mini-fy'ed me yet, but I drink it a lot, as you can tell. *Grrroan. Sorry.*

Now wake up! You don't live in Outer Space City! Your hope is not drinking awful tasting Mi-Nee powder! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

* * * * *

I'm in a White Room

I'm in a white room, but with eyes closed, it is kind of like traveling without moving. As I become better, I am able to navigate without hitting the walls, & travel far. I'm able to scale up & over & onto the ceiling, which becomes the floor or wall. Sometimes I stumble, I crash, & then I lay simply in a



white room. *Is it to a prison or a medical room where I'm bound? Is it where my body really is or is it a projection from somewhere else too?*

I get up. Let me try this again. Close my eyes, begin to move forward. Find myself floating in a kind of deep outer space, eons pass by, fear tugs at me, but cannot hold. *I float, & I float, & I float & now, finally, I come to somewhere in the far reaches of outer space.*

There's a handmade sign along the road, welcoming all to the *Motorcyclist Club's Picnic*. Lots of longhairs, leather jackets, leather pants, leather boots, but everyone's friendly. They offer me food, call me *brother*. Why, there's a bluegrass band setting up at the far end of this natural amphitheater. It's where bluegrass *should* be played.

I sit for a moment against a tree. People are smiling at me, they don't know me from Adam, as the saying goes, but doesn't matter to them. One friendly fellow comes over, he's a big guy. Six & a half feet tall or taller, 300 pounds if an ounce. He brings me over a bowl of soup & he says, *Brother, I think you should try a little bit of this rutabega-&-mushroom soup because, let me tell you, I can see by your face that this might just be the cure for what ails ya.*

I thank him, knowing no good words to say, & I begin to sip my rutabega-&-mushroom soup. Find myself, my attention, drifting from the wonderful bluegrass band down there, jumping around, fiddles & banjos, upright basses, *everybody singing, everybody clapping, everybody dancing free*. Find my attention drifting upwards, & there is that ship overhead.

Oh, right. That's where I am right now. That's where I ended up. I can't tell you how. But I'm up there, & there's a white room, & in that white room I've traveled far without much moving. And I came here, to this spot, in this big field, this rutabega-&-mushroom soup, & those friendly longhairs, & that wonderful bluegrass band. How do you think that all works?

I finish my rutabega-&-mushroom soup, & give a big wave goodbye to all the longhairs, so they know I'm appreciative. I even give a wave to the bluegrass band, & they strum up a little flourish for me to depart by. There's no stage, there never was. I walk away smiling.

Find myself walking through an empty, vast playground. Alongside me, on one side of the path, there's swings, there's a tetherball court. Come to a wall on the other side of the path, 10, 15, 20 feet high, & it's textured. I seem to recall that it's a kind of game you play where you're trying to travel from one end of the wall to the other, & you do it by throwing the ball against the textured wall. But the textured wall will knock the ball back where it does, & two teams are trying to go from one end to the other. I think it's called **Stick-it**.

I come out of the playground eventually, & I sit down on a bench. It's just a sort of empty space & I close my eyes & begin to *hmmm*. Open my eyes, back in the white room, but it's OK. It's OK this time. *I got this navigation*. Navigating with my mind, navigating with my heart, navigating with my feet. Trying to play them all together, high & happy, all attention, like that wonderful bluegrass band back there.

* * * * *

It Was an Old Spaceship, Very Old

It was an old spaceship, very old. It's like the kind of spaceship that you could see once had been great & proud, sleek. I never knew what its name was because someone had spray-painted **Feebletons** across whatever its name had been. I never knew what that meant, never heard anyone talk about **Feebletons**, whatever they are. I did find a playing card once, with a picture of a funny little spaceship.

The ship was decayed, but it kept getting bigger. It's like other spaceships were welded on to it so more people could travel along. More goods. A whole kind of weird little civilization rose up of people who'd always lived on this ship, **Feebletons**.

I lived in the garden maze. I was pretty much the only one who knew how to get around it, how to get in, & deeper in, & then back, if I chose to. Somewhere in the garden maze, I'm not gonna give you coordinates, so don't ask, there's a game going on at night. Torches light up the open area of the maze where it occurs.

We called it **Stick**. It's sort of like that baseball game they used to play, but not really. Too many other kinds of rules have been welded on to the game. Just to give you an example: there's a bell on the bat, & the bell doesn't make the bat any easier to wield. In fact, it makes it much harder, but that seems to be part of **Stick**.

And so I lived in the garden maze for a long time. Occasionally I get my news of more spaceships being welded on to **Feebletons** as it traveled along, but I'd now found somewhere far more interesting than any of that.

I'd come across a strange clearing inside the garden maze, & within that strange clearing there was a vast desert. I explored it bit by bit, but I worried that if I went too far into it, I'd never find my way back, & *then what?*

I'll tell you *then what*. I was tired of the garden maze, the endless games of **Stick**. I decided I wasn't coming back. I said goodbye to the garden maze, gave a quiet wave to the folks playing **Stick**. Couple of bells rang in my direction. Then I walked into & across that hard desert floor.

Walked & walked & walked, *walked & walked & walked*. Then, in the distance, I saw buildings, great tall buildings. I believed that maybe I was finally coming somewhere, I was finally coming to a start, all the rest behind me. *That wasn't a start, that wasn't living*. Ahead of me, those buildings in the distance, that's where I was going to begin.

The neon pink sign I come to reads:
Welcome to Wyrdd Town.

* * * * *

It Was One of Those Nights

It was one of those nights that everyone has somewhere along the way. Comin' home to my ZombieTown hovel with a plastic sack of edibles from the local grocery store. Not veggies, nothin' good in there, just chocolate & cheese puffs & ice cream & soda pop. Maybe some potato salad pretends to be dinner, maybe some cold chicken nuggets from that deli counter. Oh, and of course, a big ol' box of *ChocoSmax*

(Them's the Fax!).

And the black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, is cooperatin' reasonably well tonight. Shows last most of their length before snowin' out. Like that funny one about the weirdass bank robbers in that strange town. *Lady robber **screams** like a banshee!*

It wasn't supposed to be cold tonight but, lookin' out the full window of this warm hovel, I see the snow is fallin', fallin' heavy. *Here it comes & comes & comes.* That's OK. The kinda-sorta, after a fashion, electrical heater is on, plus there's my lovely crimson & electric blue blankets. Layin' out on the old mattress, watchin' the black & white Dü-Mónt television, driftin' in & out of snack food comar. Like the old sayin' goes, *exxxstasis.*

There's a movie on now about *this Island that I arrive to, having been sent here after a long, circuitous trek, a trek round the world? I'd become involved, you see, with a strange worldwide conspiracy of people livin' in low-budget motels, & workin' at security guard desks & coffee shops & bookstores.*

I met one, & then the next, & then they sent me along. I slept on many floors in my travels, I rode on many no-roof buses, spent a lot of time walking along from one place to another, often with just a hand-drawn map to get me from here to there. But nobody would tell me what the purpose of the conspiracy was.

*Sometimes I would crawl off to the side of the road, under a tree in the shade, & I'd have that same dream again, an old TV commercial with the blonde girl from that weirdass TV show called **Trip Town**, over & over again, never changed.*

*One time I was lucky enough to stay in a hotel room, but that didn't work out too well. Called Noah Hotel. Run by hookers & the homeless, someone told me. **They call it the No-Tell!** he guffawed.*

*But the events in that hotel room grew more remote & virtual over the course of the night. I could not get **Trip Town** off the black-&-white Dü-Mónt. The blonde girl kept **screaming** like a banshee! Even unplugging the TV didn't help.*

I look up suddenly, *oh*, back on my mattress. It's just the black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. Familiar kinda-sorta heater & lovely crimson & electric blue blankets near me. Half-et bowl of *ChocoSmax* (*Them's the Fax!*). Familiar hovel. That's all, nothing more. *The fax.*

But I close my eyes again, wondering still.

*Am I still sleeping in this ditch, dreaming of **Trip Town**?*

Am I still in this strange motel room, with fellow participants in this worldwide conspiracy?

Or am I on this beautiful Island, watching the sunset over that beautiful Wide Wide Sea?

There are many pathways to Dreamland, many Dreamlands, they say, all mystical & spooky.

* * * * *

"Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will."

— **Novalis**

"Wars in the future will be fought in the mind by drugs, dreams, televisions, internet, sex, persuasion, the manipulation of loyalties, needs, desires, to the point where to obey is to receive pleasure & endorsement, & to disobey not punishment but simply nothing. Physical war, impoverishment, suffering, disease, prejudice have all been eradicated at the cost of freedom & self created identity.

This epoch is not sustainable because the world is too badly damaged."

—**Nazi Jailbait Bitch**

Our Two-Roomed Apartment

We have two long rooms in our apartment. When you come through the front door, you can go straight or left. Go straight, & you'll find kitchen & a living room area, then a bathroom, & way back there a bedroom area, where the Creatures comfortably nap. We like to have visitors in this long room, literary gatherings & what-not.

But if you go left upon entering, through a sometimes-stuck door, you'll come to some other kind of room. It keeps going on & on & on. We like to call it **Imaginal Space**.

For my beloved & me, the left room is lined with endless bookcases &, living peaceably among these, many kinds of **lilies**. There's the **starfish lily**, a **high high high high high high-as-the-sun lily**, the **lowdown-in-the-groove lily**, & *many* others. The bookcases were here when we moved in, but then one day, while putting in lightbulbs, my beloved wished for lilies too while among the bookcases, & they came, flowing through the endless room, & out the back where there is a cement bridge, going on & on. But our left room is not yours, if you choose to visit it.

We like to say, *if you choose the left room, you've opened a door bigger than you know, for you can come in here & invent your own room. **Your own kind of room, or rooms.** Your own flowerbeds, whatever lily you choose, or any other kind of fleur. And yes, there are Creatures here too, in case you get uncertain. They will nap in your lap or **hmmmm** near you for comforts. But you'll find your way, & you'll notice that, as you begin to groove with this room, it begins to resemble something dearly familiar to you. Familiar by your dreams, familiar in your heart, familiar as you sniff, familiar to your listens, your looks around. And there you are. **Your own kind of room, or rooms.** Come share the wonders of **Imaginal Space!***

* * * * *

Down Deep in Imaginal Space

Now you may not have heard so much of **Imaginal Space** before, but let me tell you a thing or two about it. This is a story that takes place somewhere down deep in **Imaginal Space**.

Down deep where dreaming occurs, where deep communing with the world occurs, where the ferment that gives life its sense of movement occurs, there is **Imaginal Space**. Think of it as the dust & clay by which all raises & changes, becomes, & becomes again, & becomes different.

Somewhere in **Imaginal Space**, you will find yourself walking, you will find yourself entering what seems like a glowing hallway. You will walk down the glowing hallway, not knowing what it is or what you might come to. And you will hear a lady's voice in the distance, & you will approach slower, not

knowing if she is friend or otherwise, not knowing if *you* yourself might spook & scare *her*.

And so you approach slowly, perhaps crouched, just to listen, for she is speaking on & on. You go a little closer, & go a little closer, & you will see that she is seated in some kind of old fashioned couch, called a *divan*. There is a little table next to her & on it is a—*could it be?*—a magic lantern machine?

She's projecting pictures on the wall of the glowing hallway near her. One of them shows a kind of a strange rusty metal boat, & she is telling about its occupants. She says their names are Antique Andy, who is a rooster, & Ollie, who is a little froggy. They are traveling on the Wide Wide Sea, even sometimes above it. Their **tugboat**, I guess you'd call it, sometimes floats, sometimes hovers, sometimes goes right up in the air. You listen.

*They are going to visit their friend Marty, a policeman, who is taking his vacation on an **Island** far away, & has invited them to come & visit. That's where they're going & I invite you, one & all, to climb aboard that ship, & greet those friendly travelers. Take your place on that ship as it floats & hovers & sails along the Wide Wide Sea to that Island, where Marty the retired policeman is taking his vacation, well earned!*

* * * * *

You Will Meet a Light Being

Sometimes down deep in the Dreaming, you will meet a Light Being. And wherever you're bound in the Dreaming, this is more important to learn. If you're new to this down deep in the Dreaming, you need to learn this. If you've been this down deep in the Dreaming many times before, you need to be reminded. The Light Beings in the Dreaming must be remembered, must be tended, must be . . . ***just stop.***

Look. *There's a Light Being.* Don't approach too quickly. Light Beings are not all that dissimilar to Creatures. They may not spook quite as easily, but take no chances. And it's OK, because this isn't where what you were doing before in the Dreaming stops. This is where what you were doing before takes a *very interesting* turn. OK?

You approach slowly. You greet friendly. You *hmmmmmm* low. The Light Being may reply directly or may not, not from rudeness, not ignoring you, nothing like that. Light Beings exist in this universe in a different way, even from those of us who are able to travel down deep in the Dreaming, which is not many against the bigger number.

But you approach, you greet, you *hmmmmmm*, & you wait. The Light Being *will* respond. It may be something in the room that you're in. Let's say you're in the bedroom you slept in every night for years when you were young, & you're there again, trying to recover something, or learn something, or leave something. Twist an old knot new, better.

So look around. Something will be *off*. Something might be *floating*, something might be the *wrong color*, *the sky outside might be missing*, but the Light Being will let you know. A trace of this is for you to take with you. The Light Being's tending to you. And so then you need to focus on this trace & find a way to tend the Light Being in return.

Oh, I'm not giving you the best instructions here. There are no good instructions to give for every situation. It's just that when you're down deep in the Dreaming, & that Light Being appears to you,

this is a *gift* to you, to enjoy, & *to return*. Part of how to keep the lanes to Dreamland open. *But you probably already knew that!*

* * * * *

Did You Ever Have One of Those Mornings Where You Woke Up Somewhere Else?

Now I'm asking you, honestly, *did you ever have one of those mornings where you woke up somewhere else?* Now I don't just mean that you didn't end up back at your home. I mean, *somewhere else?* Maybe I also mean *somewhen else too*. Maybe even *somehow else*.

That night seemed to have begun, as I recall it, *somehow else from here*, with me in a strange hotel room. It was crowded. Not unfriendly, but not sure how I got there. *Was it a meeting? Was it a party? Was it the planning for a riot?* I wasn't sure, but I had to make a phone call to someone, & I had the seven numbers written down on a piece of paper, & on the back of the paper I had the area code number, to be safe. I don't know what that means. It was *somehow else from here*, you understand.

So I was dialing the number, using the hotel room phone, & I swear that, no matter what I did, every time I dialed, a man with a soft voice picked up & said, ***Noah Hotel, where else do you have to go tonight?*** I got pretty used to him saying that because I could not get that phone to call anywhere or anyone else. I even tried calling other rooms, & he kept picking up. *Did he grow impatient?* I'm not sure, honestly, I couldn't tell. His voice never really showed much.

I leaned back in my bed, eyes shut, listening to the crowd's planning or conspiring, whatever it might have been. Maybe it was a suicide pact I forgot I'd participated in, & here it was, coming off. But when I finally nodded & rose up from that bed, my eyes seemingly only closed a few seconds, I found myself *in this bed, in this Attic*.

You know about the Attic. It's one of those places you end up, & then you're not there for a while, & then you end up there again. *Cause & effect?* I don't think so. *Effect & cause?* Possibly. So here I am now, because I'm here, & there's no phones in this Attic. It's probably better off that way. I really don't wanna talk to that guy anyway.

* * * * *

I'm With the Senator, in a Strange City

I'm with the Senator, campaigning in a strange city. Elliptical City? Well, I can't say at this moment. But the Senator & I are traveling together, & she brings me to a house, at least it seems like a house. It's more like a barn, a barnhouse, or maybe more a housebarn. Very, very tall ceilings.

As we enter through the door of the housebarn, I don't notice it at first, but then, it's like, *I feel young again*. Oh, not just an emotional state. No, I look & touch about myself & *this is me*, long ago, same & different. *Weird*. She looks younger too, though somehow seems less amazed than I am!

The Senator & I walk through the many strange rooms of this housebarn, filled with furniture, filled with dusty books. Even one room that's just filled with colorful soap bubbles of different shapes & forms &, if you pop them, they make funny musics. *Like the boy in that old story*.

The Senator likes to pause in each room, gaze about her, land her gaze on something, linger there. She's a thoughtful Senator, quiet, especially since she's usually speaking, but something about this housebarn stills her voice completely.

We find a door that leads down some dark stairs, dank, dim, into the basement filled with bikes. Lots & lots of bikes. I don't think I've ever seen so many bikes, many colors, leaned against the walls, in long rows. Some of them don't seem to be bikes built for human beings. Almost like they're bikes built for other kinds of beings?

Walk on, & there's a mesh window. Passing it, I look out, & there's a parking lot. I don't remember that parking lot, but it's out there now. Come to a dirt floor which, walking on as we do, becomes a hill, a tall hill, then stairs again. These are very solid dark wooden stairs, stairs that'll *hold ya*, stairs that'll *hold a hundred of ya*.

We climb & climb & climb, & I know where we've come to, & I speak. *Senator, I know this place. This is the Attic*. She looks at me, her eyes twinkling behind her spectacles. She nods, gives me a gesture as though I should lead now, & I do.

The Attic goes on forever, it seems, many rooms, then for a while a long hallway, doors along each of its side. Occasionally we come to a choice of doors before us. *Best always to choose the green & gold doorknob or door or hinges. Best to stick that way*, I advise the Senator. She nods, getting the lay of the land, of the Attic.

The Attic rises now, trends up, curves away. We're outside along a long road, lots of weird stores along this long road. Lots of cars speeding by, not all of them with four wheels, not all of them have wheels, & we come to a lady, ragged & crazy-eyed & she says, *Where's the bar? Where's the bar? Please mistah, tell me, where's the bar?* I look at her, I look at the Senator, see she's puzzled. I look on down the road a-ways, & see a cluster of stores where there *could* be a bar. I point her in that direction. She smiles at us, & hurries off there.

I look at the Senator, her eyes are twinkling like before, & I say to her, *I think this Attic can bring us everywhere*.

* * * * *

Zounds! I Say

Zounds! I say as I look into the mirror & see the shrunken tooth in the middle of my head. *Zounds!* I say. And then I leave the bathroom, it's not hard, it's a very small bathroom. Not the kind you can cozy up in with your colored bubble musics & your Duckees, no sir-ee.

My hovel in ZombieTown is small but it does have walls & a ceiling & floor, for which I'm grateful. Wyrdd Godd Town was missing some of those for me. I turn on my Dü-Mónt black & white television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, & settle back in my familiar way among the wires poking out of the old mattress. There's always a trick to it that I find. Usually a big bowl of *ChocoSmax (Them's the Fax!)* in front of me. But I'm out of them right now.

My Dü-Mónt black & white television comes on eventually, & I watch my favorite new show. Now, I have not turned my loyalties away from *TripTown* but, sometimes, within *TripTown* there is another

show. *TripTown's* show, as it were, what *TripTown* watches from time to time.

Set in the future, it's called **Battle Black Tech**. It's not just a show, it's a series of shows & a series of related films. I'm saving up my *ChocoSmax* (*Them's the Fax!*) coupons to see the next film, called **Outer Space City, 100,000 A.D.** Hopefully when it comes to The Nada Theatre.

Battle Black Tech stars famous actors, playing themselves, in the far future. Impossible because they are long since dead in the far future, but in this show it happens. And there are thousands of outer space battles going on. It almost seems sometimes as if that's all there is, that's the whole story. Thousands of battles throughout outer space.

But we learn, or *TripTown* tells us anyway, how reliable a source I don't know, that these battles are fake. Says the enemy is something else entirely, & the shows & the movies are not fiction but real. Now what is *TripTown* trying to say? Is *TripTown* showing us the future of the world?

I don't know. I fall into a nap, a disturbed nap, find myself traveling again with the *Hillside Hmmmers*. Usually, after I've been watching hours of **Battle Black Tech**, they come to calm, to reassure, to guide me, & we travel together.

This time around we come to the end of a great canyon, & circle our vehicles among one another, & we all begin to *hmmmm*, & the great canyon catches our music & begins to *hmmm*, & amplifies & varies & multiplies our now shared music, till it's everywhere, & always, & maybe it's like it is saying to us: *this could also be the future of the world, my friends. Do not despair.*

* * * * *

Formed from the Dust & Clay Itself

Formed from the dust & clay itself: *Is that how you build up a world? Is that how you do it?* That's what I'm wondering as I wake up on the ground, my friends shaking me. *I have to get to that facility. It's doing the kind of experimental work I need to know about.* Make our way there, it's at the end of a long, unpaved road, scraggly trees in the distance. Not much to see.

But *o! terror!* it's being held up. We see the people inside with their hands up & others with guns. We work our way around to the back of the building, trying to get in, trying to help. It's a big building. I'm not sure how we get in, but it isn't unlocked. We become separated from one another, quietly trying to find our way to the front.

I end up in the room of a very old sick-looking man, under a sheet. He's watching a little Dū-Mónt black & white television, with an Antennar 2000 on top. A blonde girl on the television is saying at this moment: *there is old magick & old medicine & old ways of living that have re-emerged from other times. The most ancient books, written with sand-sticks in the ground even back before the time of cave paintings, say, events accumulate.*

I look back at the old man & I see him undoing to clay, undoing to dust, until all that remains of him is a smile, as peaceful as any I've ever seen.

* * * * *

I Walk into the Several-Story-High Diving Complex

I walk into the several-story-high diving complex. I climb the stairs from floor to floor until I reach the top floor. I walk to the very edge, to the diving spot. It has a funny shape to its design. Like a really weird awful green-colored **cube**?

I stare down into the design & I think, *am I going to do this, finally?* After all the times I've come into this diving complex, climbed up those stairs, walked across that empty floor to this spot, & looked down the several stories below to the water. I was even late today. I missed my bus, it flew right past me, careened at the intersection wildly. I knew it was going to drive down that *cul de sac*, & come back, & so I hurried to the stop after it comes out. *I think I'm diving this time, finally. I think I'm diving.*

The night before, we'd been up late, my beloved & I. She was dressed up very purty. There was a large TV monitor at the party we went to & it was showing that band of dreams. They were all dancing on stage as much as they were playing their instruments. Other times it's like the TV monitor was showing another party going on, at some kind of unfinished house, like in the back yard, with a long plank table, set on logs. There was an old man, & a lot of smiling people.

Then I went looking for the bathroom for just a moment, *hurry*, but the men's room was closed. Everyone was crowded into the women's room & it's like the party had moved into the bathroom. People were laughing & talking, I swear there was music there too. I think it might have been *Mellow Moods & Moments with The Pink Floyd*! Some people were naked but nothing else was going on. It was just a very merry situation.

Am I diving? Am I finally diving? Am I brave enough to do this? Am I diving?

* * * * *

A Troubled Child

I was what you might call a troubled child. I always found ways to get in to trouble in the small town I lived in, called Wyrdd Godd Town, you know it? I rarely got caught though. It was just a reputation that lingered round me until, well, I had this dream that I couldn't remember one morning, & it followed me around all day, into junior high school, where I learned nothing worth knowing. So I left junior high school that day & I went down to the local store, Chief Seattle's Friendly Market.

It was wintertime, & there was snow everywhere, & the snow made a lot more sense than people ever had, & so what happened was I began to make snowballs. Made 'em hard, tight, & round, & I stuck 'em in the deep pockets of my long woolen overcoat. It's a little long, & a little old, drags along the ground a bit. But I like it a lot.

What happened next was that I went in to that store, & I waited for the perfect moment, *& then I began to fling my snowballs everywhere! I threw them in the aisles filled with tin cans of soup! I threw them in the aisles filled with sodas & beers! I threw them in the aisles filled with paper goods! I threw them at the many cash registers! I threw them at the ceiling & at the floor!* I seemed to have more & more snowballs no matter how many I threw!

And that was a turning point for me because, you see, I was grabbed from behind & drug by unseen hands to the back of the store. I was drug into some kind of storeroom, & down a long flight of stairs,

& suddenly I was in this strange, glowing place where it was hard to see very well but there was a steady *hmmm*. I was drug down a long hallway, & I could feel something about me changing. I was no longer the scrawny little thing causing trouble, & getting away with it mostly. I was *taller*. I was more *adult*. *Really weird*.

I was somehow brought to a party, in what looked like a great big housebarn. There were microphone stands everywhere, old D  -M  nt televisions all over the place, with Antennar 5000s on top. Some of them were showing the strange activities of this party, others of them seemed to be showing parties that were happening *somewhere else*? One had some kind of band of dreams playing at it. Another was at a big home-made table in someone's back yard, but the house was half-built? An old man & a lot of smiling people there though.

At first noone talked to me & I thought, *maybe I'm in a dream, maybe I got knocked out by one of my own snowballs. Who knows?* But no, I never went back from where I come.

That night, I slept among a lot of people & other kinds of beings on mattresses with pillows & blankets that were put out all over the housebarn, & in the morning noone made me go back. In fact, when I was talked to, finally, I was told in a very dark room, in a low sincere voice: *You are now part of a worldwide conspiracy investigating why humans are so unhappy & restless. You are going to help because you have unhappiness & restlessness clouding your heart too.*

The low kindly voice continued: *It is not in your nature to be so unhappy & so restless like that. Something has gone wrong, with you & everyone else, & you must help us to investigate.* So I agreed, & I have, & I am.

* * * * *

More Myth Than a Story

This was a time, long ago, more a myth than a story or a remembrance. But back then, whenever that was, if ever that was, it's claimed that people-folks fancied themselves the leaders of Elliptical City. No, I kid you not, that's how the story goes. They strutted round like they were in charge of this strange, wild place. And sometimes they had a few good ideas. The rest of us noticed, we kind of felt like a rest-of-us back then, but a lot of times, *nah*, they were selfish, they were greedy, they were wasteful, they were disregarding.

Anyway, what happened this one time was that a group of them, Senators & others, were vying to be the chief leader. I know, *what can I say*, it all sounds very strange to me too, but they were, & they spent an entire afternoon in front of their fellow people-folks, each arguing about how he or she would be the best leader. They each had bright ideas. The rest of us listened, napped, did other things.

But see, as you know, Elliptical City is unruly, changes frequently, & that's OK, it's part of things there. That afternoon, near dusk, a great storm came to the strange stone building they'd gathered in, these leaders & their listeners. A great kind of disruption came, rains, winds. It's as though too many of them gathered together, too many of them boasting & talking & all those words. And this force gathered kind of like a giant fist & pounded their stone building. Pound! *Pound!* **POUND!** till it broke through. The roof caved in, the walls collapsed!

Now one version of this story says that those gathered inside ran every which way, trying to save just themselves, & some of them did, & some of them didn't.

But the story I prefer, & I know it's not the popular one, is the one in which those leaders, all the Senators & others who'd stood above their fellow people-folks, preening & talking in words endlessly, they didn't go anywhere. They stayed right where they were, & spent all that night, & many days thereafter, tending to those who were trapped, those who were scared, those who were injured. Tended to them all, every last one, they worked together. The hours before the great pounding from the sky was forgotten. *This is what mattered more, tending your fellows.*

And I'd like to think, though this is only my own radical thought on the matter, that something changed for people-folks from that afternoon on. I don't think they had leaders thereafter the way they used to. I think that something down deep changed, & they saw how gay & wondrous the world really is, & really could be, even for them.

* * * * *

There Was . . . James McGunn

This is how it was, some years ago. I was sitting in the Ancienne Coffeehouse, in the Village, & there was James McGunn. *The James McGunn.* The wonderful singer, songwriter, legend &, well, I mean, I was just looking at him from my shadow. No job, no prospects, I was just sitting there in that place because it was a good place to hide in such situations. They wouldn't judge you, they wouldn't kick you out, it was OK for anyone to be there.

But I was no James McGunn. I wasn't even someone to *speak* to James McGunn. That's how I felt, even though this wasn't true. He wasn't the kind of man who turned anyone away. *Hadn't I listened to his album, **Sco'u'tland**, a bajillion times? Wasn't it the music & the words of a man who is generous & open-hearted to all, even as his own demons lay deep within in him, restless?*

He was old then but he looked still handsome & fine. Not pretty, not gorgeous, but *handsome & fine.* I saw he had his guitar next to with him, & a pile of papers, a mis-sorted pile. He was sitting in just the kind of chair where someone might lift up his guitar & start to strum. *And that . . . is what . . . he did!*

Noone paid much attention to him though. I didn't know if all these others even knew who he was. It was dark in there, shadowy, smoky. I just knew, *I just knew.* That's his *own* music he was playing & his *own* voice he's singing to it with.

People began to notice, casually I guess. It's not the kind of place where you gather round & gawk, but they did notice, threw him smiles & twinkles from the sides of their faces. Grew a little bit quieter in their conversation.

He sang a song I loved about how loss can be gain. But I find myself now not remembering all the words he sang. I didn't know how this was possible. He just kept singing over & over again: *loss can be gain, loss can be gain, loss can be gain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain.* That's all I remember, but I *know* there's more.

Eventually, a big man, older too, but you wouldn't want to mess with him, came around, sat with James McGunn for a while, listened, smiled more openly than the rest. James finally finished his last song, & put away his guitar. The big man helped him up, & they headed away, in the early morning light. *But what a gift.*



What a gift! Thank you, James McGunn, thank you, Universe. *Loss can be gain.*

* * * * *

It's Tuesday, & I'm Bustling About the World

Well, it's Tuesday, & I'm bustling about the world. Last night was another long one, a wild ride of documenting. Crazier than it usually is. All that excitement about the black market discovery of an old batch of **Mulronie the Space Pirate Peanut Butter Planetoid Cookies™**. I documented the excitement for all those who were locked down in their **cubes** before they could get one.

I wander out, from my **cube**, into the grimy living complex the world has become. Walk awhile, *oh great, someone blew up the grocery store. Really?* I walk on past, there's nothing I can do. All I'm good at is documenting.

Like everyone else, I find I can't stay awake for very long in the old-fashioned way, fully, thoroughly awake. The bitter raging angry man now used, or tried to use, our own sleeping & dreaming to control us. *He was trying to close the lanes to Dreamland.* Poisoning the food & water hadn't worked, & this was working worse. At least for me. Because of my White Bunny friend's gift.

It was a long, wild night of documenting, & so I decide to indulge myself. I hustle down to my old school. It's still standing there in that old unused complex. The long, curving hallway near the cafeteria, black-&-white diamond flooring. That unused shadowy staircase down to the auditorium.

I remember all the times I've sat alone here, on these steps, since the bitter raging man. Less & less waking, & more & more dreaming for real, singing that old black market fighting anthem to the long empty hallway: *What if Dream-Mind is Supra-Consciousness?*

* * * * *

I Was Working at a Thrift Store, Long Ago

You might like this story, maybe. I was working at a thrift store long ago. That's where they sell the wonderful valuable things that people have moved on from, & now it's someone else's turn. Dusty old books. Pretty handled bags even. So I was working there, & there was this weird guy who would keep this rack of shirts in a corner of the store. I'm not sure if he really was an employee, or just someone who came around, it was hard to tell in those days, but he was always telling people: *see that rack of shirts in the corner? I would take any of those shirts as a Christmas present. You keep that in mind, you can choose among any of them.*

So it was a good job in its own way, & I would say that I was happy there, relatively speaking. Paid enough for my hovel's rent round the corner. Then one day I noticed in the corner, not the shirt rack corner, but the other corner, there was this black-&-white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 3000 on top, bigger than mine at home. It would sit there, quiet as secrets for a long stretch, but sometimes just come on of its own volition. Choose its own channels to show, like this cruel game show that was on a lot.

I'd seen it before. They were cruel to people, they were mean with words & deeds. They had the kind of games where you lost things at the end, nobody ever won, & yet it was very popular. It seemed like a

lot of people liked the fact that people would come on this TV game show & lose every time.

I remembered that, for a while, it became a happy game show. People would come on & they wouldn't just win things, they would become happy. *Happy!* It wasn't a car or a stove or whatever. No, they would leave happy. *Going to the Festival maybe? Learning the way?*

But this show wasn't as popular. I'm not sure really why, but I tend to think that maybe there was a little bit of jealousy in the viewership because there was no clear way to get on this show to get your bit of the happiness, as it were. Ratings dived, according to what I read, in the TV industry newspaper, *The Eighth*, which of course I followed closely because they came in sometimes on the donations truck. People would get rid of them & I would cop them, a few weeks later than up-to-date, but still.

So what finally happened is that the cruel game show came back on, & it was more popular than ever, because it was crueler than ever. Now I'm not sure why the black and white Dü-Mönt television, with the Antennar 3000 on top, chose to show this show a lot, but it seemed like the guy I told you about, with the shirt rack in the corner, employee, maybe not employee? Anyway, he was fascinated by this show &, when it was on, he would veer away from the shirt rack, & away from giving everyone he could hints about what a good Christmas present these shirts would mark. He'd just watch & watch, & laugh, & laugh, & laugh, & *laugh & laugh & laugh*.

* * * * *

If You're Going to Travel Along in the White Woods at High Speeds

Well now, if you're going to travel along through the White Woods at high speeds, or at least interesting ones, you may as well be, if you're lucky, in the comfy confines of my dear friend Sydnee Grand Prix SE. *A fine automobile*. She's swifts along through these White Woods, &—

Now wait a minute here. I know a thing or two about these magical White Woods myself, & there are few, if any, paths or roads through these White Woods. While I acknowledge that your dear friend Sydnee Grand Prix SE is a fine automobile, how is she able to travel without roads or paths, or very few of them?

Meep! Meep! she says calmly. **Zoom! Zoom!** she explains further.

Ah, you say, tis the science & physic of the White Woods.

Yes, indeed, I reply, that *is* what it is all about. *The science & physic of the White Woods*. That one time, I was sitting in her back seat, amongst many Creature friends, & we were trading electronic files amongst ourselves, as though they were baseball playing cards. Yes, indeed, I'd finally become an honorary electro-fellow Creature. I don't know if I had a nifty name like some. Eurydice. Penelope. Mariposa. Lucille. So many. I might have just been called **the one that works most of the time & serves Creatures**.

Meep! Meep! Sydnee Grand Prix SE cries merrily. **Zoom! Zoom!** she adds philosophically.

* * * * *

Down There

Down there, *grrroan, sorry*, it's hard to tell the rest. Down there is as far as I've gotten for years. *Grrroan, sorry*. I try to tell & *grrroan, sorry*, this happens. Down that hill, that place down there that we're all looking at, led by the old football tight end, who's taken us away from the violence & the stupidity & the costumery of that other city, are the very outskirts of what I learned many years later is sometimes referred to as *Elliptical City*.

First building we come to in Elliptical City, as we slowly make our way down there, is a strange seedy hotel. It feels like it's a mile high, but what remains above ground is about a single floor.

There's a girl there, seems nice enough. She has a nifty little camera, & she's shooting some pictures of the hotel as our crowd approaches. She notices us for a moment, & then continues her work. Then pauses for a moment, looks at me, pretty turquoise eyes freeze me. We exchange a glance that lingers without words, & then she hands me a little envelope, In it are pictures I guess she took. The envelope is marked *Shaw, Massachusetts*.

The pictures depict the interior of an old church, an ancient church really. It doesn't even look like it's a building, really, it's more like a clearing in the White Woods, shaped like a temple, & there's moonlight coming down to help fill in the outlines. Everyone in this temple, all these different people, are all separate from one another, they're all sitting far apart from each other. I can almost feel their *hmmmming* together.

I look at her again. She smiles pretty turquoise eyes at me & says strangely, *is this what's it like in the White Room?*

* * * * *

I Had to Retreat to My Friend's Artiste Studio

I had to retreat to my friend's artiste studio in Gay E.C. My piglet friend is an ancient, wise, & merry Creature. She welcomed me in, with a friendly sweep of her paw, indicating that I could stay as long as I wanted, & enjoy whichever of the many rooms of her artiste studio I chose. She suspected, with a tricky smile on her blue-&-pink face, that I would choose the *round room*.

It is, indeed, a round room that you enter through the green door with the golden doorknob. You take your seat to the left of the door, in the row of folding chairs, & it's best you keep your seat in this round room. For soon you will be entirely immersed, unable to distinguish *here* from *there*, *you* from *me*, *this* from *that*. You are swathed in *beautiful smells*, filled with *lovely tastes*, within the sweetest *hmmm* you could imagine. Swept amongst a bajillion *colors* or more, perhaps just six or seven, it's hard to say. *Everything* is close, close, *close! Thoughts*, deep. You can imagine *forward* into the round room, to shape what you see & feel & experience, or you can lean *back* in your chair & let it *roll* through you, let it *decide* how you should be, *what* you shall experience here.

I'd been spending many days chasing strangers with my hands open & my eyes wide. These strangers eluded me, these strangers were indifferent to me.

I came here to this round room to be reminded that *there are no strangers, & there is no difference. All is green, all flows, all sings, all is near. All is unitive.*

The White Woods about this artiste studio so ancient, & yet friendly, gentle, funny. *With me, now, in this round room.* Showing me what it's like to be *hugged* by a tree, *embraced* by music, *tasted* as though you are delicious, *sniffed* as though you are a bloom. I come to the round room for a timeless time.

When I left, I realized again we are each & all medicine to each other. My old friend smiled at me. Yes, of course!

* * * * *

Maybe Still in the White Room

Maybe still in the white room, maybe still near the empty playground, I don't know. Just don't know. I leave the bench & now just sit in a big green field. I think about the interface of memory, dream, wish.

And I think, *that's Art. Memory, dream, wish. Their interface.*

What else is there, really? I sit in the big green field for a long time, & then I'm drawn by a noise. I don't know what noise it is, but I leave the big green field, & I walk back into the White Woods.

For a long time I don't come to anything, & then suddenly I'm in a garden maze. And there are Creatures moving around. I *think* there are Creatures moving around, they seem to keep hidden, half-seen as they move around. So I just look around vaguely & I say, *Art is the interface of memory, dream, & wish.* Then I wait, listen closely.

I hear a few casual sniffs, perhaps even a curious sniff or two. But I will leave these fine Creatures to their garden maze. I will walk through it until I've come to the other end, or until I end up deeper in it still, like a certain Gate I've heard tell of.

I will walk on through the aisles of the garden maze till I come to the center, & there, on a small purple stool, is an antique typewriter. And there's a sheet in the typewriter, & a typed few words. These words say: **Art is the interface of love & a world.**

So I ask you now, which one is right?



Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life? This was the question. Or must I live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men, whose experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land? These questions I cannot answer yet. But I fear.
—George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, 1858.

* * * * *



Contagion

Moving like a boat whistle in the fog,
to all corners and quick,

from the ragged men along the railroad line,
to those that have sat for years

on the top bough, and to the bald children,
and the ignorant, those with flowers in their ears,

and the aging, some who can still drive themselves
to the iron gates,

who look over their shoulders one last time,
trying to remember what it was like to be young.

Suddenly we find ourselves saying goodbye,
unable to hug, unable to kiss,

still walking, still taking our own breaths.
The lights are going up in the fairground.

Some arrive with their puppies and their tumors.
Some expect to see Jesus, or John Frum,

but the tents are filled only with strawmen,
saying "What will be will be."

Some will slide by, never knowing what it means
to have to do what you have to do.

The shapes in some beds are still,
while others are moving,

and although your heart still keeps my blood pumping,
this may be our Galilee.

Please, don't let them put me in the room
with all the dead,

because when you're dying
you should feel like you're the only one.

* * * * *





Rivers of the Mind

[A Novel]

*"Purify the colors, purify my mind
Spread the ashes of the colors
over this earth of mine"*

—Arcade Fire, "Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)," 2004.

Chapter 1: Blue Topaz

i.

The blue topaz crystal represents eternity—it has a pure soul, everlasting and serene. I found one in a creek bed in a little town in the Texas hill country. It is the state's stone. I'd hitchhiked there from Alabama, where I was looking for blue quartz and agate. Blue quartz promotes creativity and inner peace—agates, another popular gem, are for people in need of protection. I sold a lot of blues in those days—the people I met often seemed like they were in need of solace, relief.

I strung the blue topaz crystal onto a hemp cord and kept it in a box with the others. That was three days ago. It was the crystal I'd dug out of my things this morning when I needed comfort. The acid from the day before was still lingering, and I felt uneasy. I checked the clock. 34 hours, 9 minutes had gone by since I took it. It had been a beautiful trip, just beautiful—but I was ready for it to stop. The place someone goes with acid isn't a place they should stay.

I had taken a lot. More than I'd expected to take. For the first hour or so, I stared up at the sky. I was next to a big military compound where someone told me that the government had found a UFO. I was hoping to see something, but I quickly forgot about it, and instead just laid in the grass, staring up at the stars.

Time seemed to melt away, and I let my mind drift, slowly breaking ties with my body and collapsing into the heavens, until I was surrounded in color. Moments from the last few years drifted over me. The lingering feeling that I was not where I was supposed to be melted away.

I forgot the feeling that, at my age, with my education, I should have been somewhere in North Dakota working on an oil field, living with a wife and kids and a house and a car, not homeless, wandering the country looking for crystals and making necklaces. I forgot about it all.

When the acid peaked, it must have been close to midnight. But I was too far gone to return to my body and look at my watch. *I am somewhere else, somewhere indescribable, when I start to feel myself fall. A great, titanic gravity begins pulling me in, and I feel myself just imperceptibly slide into what I could only explain as . . . a crack in the universe.*

Thick, glowing blue energy pulses around me—I am surrounded by a chattering whirl of panicked voices and sirens. I think for a moment that I've ended up in the hospital, but I make myself relax and let it be, telling myself to not get bogged down in what might be happening. Whatever is, is—that is that.

For a moment, I wade in the energy. Souls are being sucked down into some kind of indescribable deep, leaving their bodies, as I sit still, entirely unmoved. I wonder what I am seeing—Am I looking at Hell?

Heaven? I feel an energy wash over me, taking me under like a great wave at high tide, and spilling over my body. It surrounds me with the sounds and sensations of peace.

If I am dead, I am comfortable with it, and can accept whatever comes my way. For a moment, my body cries out to me, and I can see it miles above me, sitting in the field. A feeling like cold water pouring from my brain, and down over my bones, floods over me.

The sensation still lingered there as I woke up. It was five in the morning. Everything around me was a solemn and grave blue. The trees and rocks breathed; swirls of fractal patterns edged at the periphery of my vision. I was still tripping, and hard. When I propped myself up, I found the grass around me bent outwards. I wondered for a while if I had been abducted by aliens, but ended up laughing the thought off.

Reorienting myself, I found my bags, hidden underneath a tree. I took out the topaz crystal and waited to come down, overwhelmed with awe at the power of what had happened the night before.

I breathed in. "Thank you," I whispered to the earth. I could almost feel it groan in reply.

That was this morning, and I was still there later that day, underneath the tree. Still seeing everything around me breathe, still seeing fractals out the corners of my eye, my mind still racing like your mind does sometimes when you're at the peak of a trip.

I'd taken enough that I hardly expected to feel totally normal the next day, but not enough that I should have been feeling these effects that far into the day. I had wondered, for the last hour or so, what to do. I needed to come back to reality. Sometime just before nightfall, with no end in sight, the idea hit me. Vitamin B. Niacin. My friend in Philadelphia used that to come down from a crazy acid trip a few years back. I'd passed a Walmart while walking into town. I'd walk there, buy some vitamins and then, hopefully, I could come down.

ii.

Walking to Walmart felt like it took eons. Cars dragged by, followed by brilliant tracers. Some of them looked like army cars, probably heading to that compound. A few folks glanced at me with suspicion, but mostly paid me no mind. But I could feel their thoughts—*"how sad"*—*"how disgusting"*—*"so sad to see heroin destroying this town"*—coming at me in overwhelming waves.

I could hear the gears inside of their mouth-engines in minute detail—the sound of teeth gnashing down against gum behind barely cracked windows. I could see colors around them—most of them were red, some grey, some violet and blue—halos of light behind their heads—souls quivering behind their eyelids.

It was an hour of this until I got to Walmart. The flickering of the lights in the parking lot burnt my eyes. I knelt down against the ground and held my hands over my eyes, at which point I was treated to a vivid swirl of aggravating yellows and blues. I hear a voice nearby, a woman's voice—*"I can't let my kids see this. I ought to call the police."*

My eyes darted up at her. "Huh?" I asked.

A woman, putting her child into a car seat, looked back over her shoulder. "I didn't say anything." *I don't believe her at first, but when I look at the colors behind her eyes, I realize that she isn't be lying.*

I studied her closer. *She's in pain. Her husband is gone again, and she's afraid to be sleeping in the house alone.* I wanted to give her an agate, for strength, but I didn't need to read her mind to know she was afraid of me. *"Disgusting,"* I heard her mumble in her thoughts, *"He's staring at me. So creepy."*

I turned away, and moved on quickly. "I can't hear her thoughts! I can't hear anyone's thoughts!" I murmured to myself.

Another family getting into their car all stared at me. I looked back at them. *"Did he just say something?"* I heard them say, although their lips weren't moving. *A teenage boy inside of the car pictures himself in my shoes with horror. His little sister thinks I look like someone from her history book. Their mother*

is preoccupied with whatever she is planning on doing with the guacamole they'd bought at the store. The father is fantasizing about killing me but, still, in the back of his mind, also thinking about the guacamole. It wasn't what you'd think.

I walked quicker, trying hard not to let any words leak from my brain. An old lady exited the Walmart and started heading towards me. Her cart creaked and groaned. *She is tired, exhausted, deeply sad.* How can I ignore her? I suppose it could be a delusion. But what if it's not?

"Can I help you?" I asked, as she opened the back door of her tiny red sedan. *My voice sounds raspy and earthen to her.* She looked at me with a faint smile, but a deep-seated fear. *She is afraid. She pictures me trying to mug her.*

I shut my eyes. *She thinks I sound crazy.* "With the bags. I can help you load up your car," I croaked.

"I don't have any more money," she said. *She assumes I am a beggar. I suppose I look the part.*

"I don't need any—it's alright."

Without another word, I lifted up the two heavier bags, and set them in the back of her car for her. "Thank you, young man," she said. *I hear her breathe a sigh of relief in her mind.* I nodded and hurried into the Walmart.

Grabbing a cart and struggling to right my course as I entered the store, I looked up towards the ceiling to try and read the signs. None of the letters made sense to me—all of them seemed jumbled and bizarre. *This place is loud. Exploding with minds, with music, with buzzing lights.*

The manager spotted me immediately. I looked threatening. *He is expecting me to steal something. He imagines fighting me off with an assault rifle, or engaging me in a knife fight. If he can teach me a lesson, maybe Jill from customer service will finally see that he's—*

I need to stop, I tell myself, I can't hear what they're thinking. The colors I'm seeing are from the acid. So are the voices. So is everything.

Trembling, I wandered towards what loomed like the pharmacy, and saw a row of green bottles I presumed to be vitamins. None of the labels made any sense to me. I couldn't read. Irritated, I threw up my hands and pondered trying to find a customer service person.

The thought unnerved me. What was I thinking? I can't have a normal conversation right now. I can't handle that. I guess I should have thought of that before I came here. I thought of all the people in the parking lot who had thought about calling the police. If I got arrested, I didn't want to imagine what could happen. Not here in Texas.

I heard a woman's footsteps come by. *An employee?* A young woman in a Walmart uniform appeared around the corner. She was a little bit shorter than me, her shoulders draped with curly, dark brown hair. A brilliant red corona swirled around the center of her dark hazel eyes.

"I can't read," I said to her, lying, "My doctor said I need Vitamin B."

Feeling very sorry for me, she headed into the aisle, scanning through the pill bottles with her index finger until she found what I was looking for. She handed it to me, grinning. The first genuinely kind person I've met. *She understands what I'm going through, somehow. The lights hurt her sometimes too.*

Her name is Meagan. She has wanted to be a doctor since her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. Before that, she wanted to be a psychologist. Her older brother works at a fast food place on the other side of town, on top of two other jobs. Last summer, she took five grams of mushrooms and experienced ego death while sitting waist deep in the Guadalupe River.

I grimaced to try and keep these delusions from coming into my head.

"Niacin. Do you have any niacin?" I asked.

She nodded again, found a bottle, and handed it to me, smiling.

"Thank you so much," I said.

"Do you need anything else? Food, water, blankets?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," I replied, starting to walk away.

She wants to have more of a conversation with me. She wants to know where I'm from.

I wanted to put my delusion to rest. "I'm from California," I said.

She froze. "I was going to ask," she said.

"I think I can read minds," I admitted. "What kind of doctor do you want to be? A neurologist?"

She is afraid, but not in the way where she wants to call the police or run away. She's impressed. Maybe we can be friends. She nodded.

"Let me give you something," I said.

I slung around my pack and took out a pencil case full of crystals on strings. *Somewhere nearby, the manager has been alerted to my presence.* I knew that, apparently, because I could read minds. I could read minds, it seemed, because I took acid. Wonderful.

I fished one out. "This is a tourmaline," I said.

She looked at it. She was visibly uncomfortable, but only because she could see people staring.

"It will give you bravery," I muttered, "Concentration, balance, and confidence. That sort of thing."

The manager swung around the corner. "Is this guy bothering you, Meagan?"

Meagan shook her head, "No, no, I was just helping him find some vitamins."

She also thinks I'm psychic now, and is staring at the crystal with awe.

"What are those? Where did you get those?" the manager demanded.

I froze. *He is repressing a deep-seated rage.* "Th-th-they're mine. I make these for people at . . . at . . . concerts and . . . stuff," I stuttered, shaking.

"Oh yeah? Look pretty nice. How much do those fetch for?" he asked, skeptically.

"I don't charge money. They're healing crystals," I replied softly.

Raising his eyebrows, the manager scoffed, starting to reach for the box. The two of us locked eyes, and he froze. *My consciousness stretches until it brushes up against his. A slight bit of mental pressure and the walls break open. I enter his nervous system, and become aware of every movement of his mind and every feeling inside of his body—*

He tries to jerk away, but I hold him still. I held him still. Unbelievable! I start to panic, and struggle to bring my consciousness back into my body. Instead, I tear him away with me. I rip his psyche from its native mind, watching it ooze out of his skull like a thick red water. There's a small person trapped in there, shaped exactly like him.

No one else knew what was happening. We looked like we were having a staring contest.

His consciousness comes closer and closer until he is sucked into my forehead. He drifts into a higher plane of existence which comes detached from the other pieces of my being—a long tunnel inside of my mind, covered in mirrors and bright blue lights, where he sees me running away from him—all the while with the image of my physical face staring down at him from high above—

A powerful force drags him along as he screams profanities at me. He sees his physical body, its expression vacant and pale. Flailing, he tries to dig his fingers into the sides of the tunnel, but there is no escape, as much as I would like to put a stop to this whole ordeal.

I have a man's entire consciousness in my brain. It was, unsurprisingly, a first for me, and an uncomfortable one at that. *It feels . . . strange. Like he is a part of me, but still separate. And I feel like I'm in two places at once. Intuitively, I manifest as a hologram in front of him.*

Hoping to at least make his stay inside my head productive, I try to speak to him, though I don't know what to say besides, "Please don't take my crystals."

"Let me out!" he screams, though no one else can hear him, **"Please! Please let me out."**

"I swear I didn't steal these," I insist. *I try to make him cognizant of what I had been through to collect them, sharing my memories. The force which had been pulling him deeper into my mind begins to dissipate and, panting, he collapses to the ground. I watch him for a little bit. Did he know what I was trying to say? Was the message coming through? Was I being attacked in real life?*

This couldn't be real. *I try to go to him gently, to help him up. He swings his arms up and tries to punch me. Too soon to try that. It hurts at first, until I realize that it is my mind—I get to decide if his*

punches can hurt me.

I'd taken acid only four or five times before, but I'd learned much about consciousness, the nature of pain and suffering and death, the nature of love and hope and peace, the harmony at work in the world. I knew, if nothing else that, as angry as this man was, there was compassion that I needed to feel for him. I could've been him, had things been only a little bit different. If I'd have never made it out of Sacramento, never gone to school, never worked at the oilfields.

The anger and hate that the man carries in his heart radiates and lashes out at those around him, pelting them with negative energy, but also withering away his own soul. I know this both by studying his mind and by listening to the minds of the other people in the store. Wait a moment. He hears me thinking.

"Stop," he whispers. **"Stop doing that."**

I know that I should try to say more, but it is still too overwhelming, too unreal. I can only manage to repeat, slightly more desperate this time, my simple plea: "Please don't take my crystals."

He punches me another time and takes off running back towards his physical body. I chase him through the psychic plane. "Wait!" I shout. He only runs faster. I begin to gain speed on him, grabbing onto his leg just as he tries to leap out of my eyes—

I drift between our two bodies—the field of unity between us stretches as we fly closer and closer towards his face. There will be no escape. I can see his iris, swirling in a fantastic array of colors and lights, growing larger, until I am swallowed up by his pupil—

Entering his psyche, I float through a smoldering war zone. A gruesome fractal spiral of skulls and bones rises up into my face. I hold onto him.

He's panicking. His stomach sinks, and an overwhelming, psychedelic nausea fills his guts—

I release him, and hold up my hand—my hand does not exist, but it is useful to imagine it. Gesturing for peace, for a pause in the violence, I try to listen. The visuals of anger and hatred I can feel within him are ones that I had felt taunting me once before. I can feel his pain. It is a pain I have felt too. Maybe I can help him out.

He used to like flowers before his older brother said that it was gay. He used to stare with wonder at the stars in the sky, or at the sunset, before this was swallowed up by wounded pride. From the battlefield in his mind grows dandelions and morning glories, overtaking the war machines. He recalls in vivid detail his grandfather's house, the feeling of a soft rabbit clutched against his stomach, the rolling green hills flooded with angelic sunlight.

He runs deeper into the darkness. The flowers and sunlight chase him. He shuts himself in his childhood room and draws down the blinds, searching for a gun. Perhaps memories were not working to lift him out of the darkness.

Maybe I should say something. "Don't listen to what those people on the Internet tell you. Someone like Jill doesn't need to see you pretend to be strong or powerful. Maybe you can show her pictures of your dog or something." He has a very cute dog. Its name is Pringle.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Head." he fumes. *A river of blood tears through the flowers in a vortex of rage, and the world fills with the color of smoldering embers erupting from underneath me. He wants to pull me under. He wants to destroy me. He has learned his hatred of these things too deeply.*

The sudden assault throws me off balance and leads me vulnerable to attack inside the enemy mind. The manager appears beneath me, and drags me into an ocean of imagined blood. I can see my face. It's blank. My dilated eyes start to suck me back towards my mind, but I do not follow them—I don't want to give up on the manager.

At first, I choke under the water. He punches me, knocking the teeth from my skull. The violence was imagined, a metaphor. He found a way to drag me into his psyche. From every side, the darkness pulses with loud and angry music.

I search for my center. This was all in his head. He was imagining it. He couldn't really hurt me. I need to return his assaults with compassion. Let his anger fall on deaf ears. Light surrounds me, and chokes out the sounds of music—

Now he is drowning in the water, finding his punches can do nothing. Maybe I should go back. I hope I at least taught him a lesson. I rise up and shoot back into my body. The field of oneness which had encircled us recedes, and my consciousness reunites with the rest of my mind. Finally. Back in my body.

The manager, with tears streaming down his face, stared back in agony, trying to move his lips. His body was paralyzed even as his mind began to regain control. “Get out. G-g-get out . . .” he struggled to say.

No lesson. The anger has only deepened, spreading to a crowd that surrounds me. Meagan, kind as she may be, cannot help but relish the manager’s predicament. Many of the employees feel the same way. He is a tyrant. They find joy in his humiliation. They want a fight. Rage spreads like an unseen cancer.

The customers formed a crowd to watch us. *The single father with four children who wears an oil-stained shirt shakes his head, believing I’ve provoked something. The two old women believe I am demon possessed; they are going to a bible study, and will pray for my salvation. The teenager with the amused look on his face came here to buy DXM; he’s aiming for the second plateau. He thinks we looked ridiculous.*

I quickly jammed the box of crystals into the backpack and ran out of the store as quickly as I could.

iii.

Frantic and mortified at what I’d just done, I didn’t stop running until I got to the road, at which point, I knelt down, clutching my head and stifling a scream. Did that really happen? Or was it just the acid?

It shouldn’t have been the acid. But if it wasn’t the acid, then it had really happened. I rocked back and forth. I was hyperventilating. I look insane. *Listen to those people at the stoplight.*

I needed to relax. I hadn’t eaten since yesterday morning. Maybe if I got some food in my stomach, I could go back to normal. Or maybe if I drank some water—I’d been sweating a lot. Of course! That’s what it was! I was dehydrated and hungry. My cells were revolting. I must feed them or they would consume me.

Desperately, I ran towards a gas station, jaywalking through traffic and stumbling on the curb. Four or five people honked at me. I felt like I could vomit.

I set my pack down near the door to the gas station out of courtesy and quickly ran to go get a bottle of water. Frantically, I tore three or four from the shelf. Was this a safe place? *Who is that watching me?*

The cashier. *Ahmed. He immigrated from Pakistan three years ago. He’s already called the police twice today and, in retaliation for the store’s owner paying him less than minimum wage, has decided he won’t stop shoplifters anymore. He earned a master’s degree in chemistry before he moved here and told his parents he would help them come to the United States, once he found a better job.*

I grabbed a bag of chips, and headed to the counter, slamming my bounty down and avoiding eye contact. I pointed towards the rack of hot food along the counter, my finger shaking. “Can I get a bunch of those too?”

“The taquitos?”

“Sure.”

“How many?”

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. *He wants to give me all of them. They’re going to expire in half an hour, and he doesn’t care if the owner loses money at this point. He has taken advantage of the workers as long as they’ve worked there, and no matter what his parents say—*

I needed to stop reading people’s minds. It was none of my business.

I dug through my pocket for money. “Don’t worry, man. I got you.” He opened the register and quickly slammed it shut. *Giving charity to the less fortunate is part of his religious duty. He fantasizes*

for a moment about giving me all of the money in the cash register, but recoils in shame at his impulse. It would be a bridge too far.

“Thank you.”

iv.

I sat down outside of the store, and guzzled down a bottle of water as quickly as I could, breathing. The visuals began to subside but, in my mind, I still felt like I was tripping.

I still felt a chorus of emotions, thoughts, and memories all around me. My heart was pounding, filled with anxiety. I was alone, in a strange city, awash with psychic powers.

I scarfed down the taquitos, as quickly as I could. I didn't feel hungry, but my mind knew I should be.

The food felt strange, richly vivid but alien as it slid down my throat and into my stomach. I could feel the tingle of serotonin in my gut as the food began to slink into my belly. Rather than dissipate, my senses began to amplify.

I can feel, in vivid detail, the texture of the pavement, the energy in the power lines coursing through the air. The smells of the town—a strange mix of cow manure and petroleum, the perfumes and colognes and sweat dripping off of people, the latent humidity in the air—all fill my nose with a palpable thickness.

A hulking black pickup, reeking of energy drinks and chewing tobacco, and broadcasting low sounds of a gun-fighting podcast through a cracked window, inched into the parking lot. *An ominous wave of darkness comes over me, dominating the air. The spirit of the surroundings turns grey.*

I feel something coming. A wave of psychic pain and terror.

The truck is arriving from Wichita. It contains two minds.

The first mind belongs to Arthur Callaway. His brain remains tense and hyper-aware, reeling after a police officer had followed them with its sirens on. He had pulled over, but the officer drove on, heading somewhere else. There is a boy in the back seat named Zachary Mendez. He's been kidnapped. A chemical fog lingers in his sleeping brain.

I started shaking, watching Callaway, an old husky man *who had been discharged from the military in 1970*, emerge from the truck and come towards me.

His thoughts are immeasurably dark. His heart has grown callous. \$200,000. That was the price for this job.

I stood up, trembling. If this was real, I needed to do something.

Callaway entered the gas station ponderously. Ahmed looked at him with an ounce of boredom. *Callaway doesn't like Ahmed. He doesn't like having to deal with these “sand niggers,” as he calls them. He wonders, with a touch of humor, if it was some kind of Arab who bought the kid he was transporting.*

I stood up and entered the gas station, coughing. Callaway looked at me with disgust, *trying to figure out if I'm a junky*. I bumped into him.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” I said.

Ahmed grimaced as Callaway stepped back. “Watch where you're going,” he barked.

I looked into his eyes. *An aura of black surrounds his skull, a piercing grey dominates his eyes. He froze into a rigid stasis, and I feel my consciousness wash over his.*

I search through his memory, and learn what he did. A sense of dread creeps up on him as the memories surge from whatever part of his brain they were locked in. He tries to pull away, but it is no use. Those taquitos were very filling, and now I felt easily ten times stronger than before. I rip Callaway's soul from his body. It shoots from his eyes and into mine, being drawn deeper and deeper into my mind. I think of all he has done, not only to the kids, but to the women in his life, to his own family, and my soul wells with an intense anger. His face melts with terror as my mind burns with an intensity I have only felt in distant nightmares.

Callaway shoots from an icy black tunnel into a swirling mess of cataclysmic energy, being drawn

deeper and deeper into my rage. He screams for mercy. But what mercy has he ever shown? I tear the skin from his mind until his soul reduces to a skeleton—

I throw the memories of his crimes back at him. They spin through his nervous system and tear open his mind like a thousand turning saw blades—

Old wounds explode from out of calcified scar tissue and grow wider—

Soon there will be nothing left—

Tears streamed down his physical body's face, as blood gushed from his nose, and out the corner of his mouth.

Did I kill him? A sense of guilt overcame me—I really was a killer, after all—I *stop pulling Callaway in*. His soul rattles like dry bones, laid bare.

“Please—please—stop—stop it—”

I could have been him. Only a few steps in my life different, a few missed chances to learn and I would have been him. If I hadn't left North Dakota, maybe, who knows—I could have become worse. There are lessons that we learn over and over, one of which is how destructive it is to hate, and although I had tried to let this lesson sink in, I was reminded of it there. I had caught myself in an impulsive cycle of rage and only held onto it.

And now here I hold the broken soul of a person, one who I could have healed, and I have chosen instead to let him whither. The two of us both began to cry. *I show him where I came from, or at least the parts I wanted to remember—Sacramento. I was a healer, I explained. I left my life as a geologist to sell healing crystals at music festivals.*

I realized that money doesn't matter as much as your sense of inner peace. Even if you have money, at what cost has it come? How much chaos has your mind had to bear?

A pause. His mind filters through what I said, and reaches its own conclusions. “I need to turn myself in,” he keeps saying. “I need to go to prison.”

“You need to get help,” I say. “You need to get better.”

“I need to get better.”

“You need to—”

“Yes—yes—”

I shoot him back into his body. A dead-eyed stare overtook what remained. Ahmed was praying, afraid that something terribly dark had happened.

His prayer becomes a flood of shapes and colors, streaming up through a thousand tiny frames into some kind of Ultimate. A huge and infinite light, a fractal nothingness, white as snow, dead as bones yet pulsing with life. I cower underneath it—I didn't know what I was doing—I'd nearly killed a man out of my own rage.

From the core of myself, I can see that the Ultimate is at peace, at peace with us. Loving in a way where it knows all of our faults but nonetheless believes in our eventual redemption. Callaway, still sharing his consciousness with me, stares upwards at it, trembling as he regained control of his own mind. The colors around his skull flashed white and blue, with trails of purple.

“Where am I?” he wonders.

“Texas,” I reply.

He shivers. “Fuck. I hate Texas.”

“Well, you'll be tried in Kansas, at least. Don't be afraid,” I tell him. “Don't worry. Plead guilty. Find a way to find peace with what you've done.”

He stares up at the light. “What is that?” he asks.

“I don't know.”

He stares at me incredulously.

“I've seen it before, but I don't really know what it is.”

v.

I recede from the man's mind. He patted his legs, searching for his phone. Ahmed watched us both with confusion. *Either we are both on something very strong, or this is just some kind of American thing he doesn't understand.*

"Hello. My name is . . . my name is . . . Arthur Callaway. I need you to come arrest me . . . I . . . I kidnapped a child. I was driving to Houston to sell him to a client . . . I can't do this anymore," he said.

Gulping, the man hung up and ran to his truck, opening the door to reveal a child fast asleep in a car seat. Under the influence of sleeping pills. He carried the child out to the curb and sat, motionless, waiting for the police. *His mind is blank, save a single phrase he keeps repeating— "I need to get better."*

I looked over at Ahmed. He sighed. "You know, the police have already been here twice today."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I did know that."

Solemnly, I bit into the last of my taquito, watching Callaway and the kid sit in complete silence, waiting for the police.

* * *

Chapter 2: ***The Dragon From Beyond***

i.

Stumbling down the road through rural Texas, the starlight dripping down through my pores, a cool and serene ecstasy floated down the wind. Looming colors hung across the night sky along an infinite distance. The ground undulated ceaselessly through a forever's worth of hills and tiny houses, like waves of endless sound.

I'd grown used to the thoughts—they swirled like a cloud all around me. Doppler-affected mumblings shone from the drivers zooming along on the highway, and poured out like fire from hearths inside of the houses I passed by.

The power of my mind at once overwhelmed and enraptured me. It had to be more than just acid. Enough people had taken acid that someone would have gotten superpowers by now, if it was possible.

I thought back to the place where I'd taken it. The man who traded the tabs of acid to me for the healing crystals half-joked and half-suggested that the government worked on dismantling alien spaceships there.

I had to return to find the truth for myself, to crawl my way back to the womb where I'd been reborn. Blackberry Creek.

I felt aware of what I could do even if, strangely, I was less aware of what I was feeling. Trying to define my thoughts, the directions of them, was impossible. I was lost in each second that passed, drinking up its sweet elixir and hoping it didn't eat me alive. Wandering through an empty field, and hoping I didn't step onto a landmine. Momentary thoughts and impulses were only that. Whirring by me for an instant in a thousand scattered voices, leaving me there. I didn't bother grabbing onto them. They moved too fast.

Instead, my mind was split up into a thousand pieces, all working at once like a watch with a thousand gears, springs, and switches. It left me aware, but rudderless, like I was a boat in the current of this new conscious energy. Each thought lost in that great river of the mind meant little, its essence ephemeral.

In spite of that sense of momentum, the burden of choice still pressed in on me. Which of



those thousands of meanderings and diversions I chose to pursue on this dramatic course mattered and, more than ever, I felt that each action, each step, each breath that I took was starkly intentional, the exercise of titanic willpower.

And what terrified me more than anything was the thought of doing wrong. It terrified me so much I dreaded doing anything at all. What if I killed someone? I came close back in the gas station. If someone looked at me, for a few seconds, I could suck their mind from their body, and swallow them whole in a torrential avalanche of memories and doubts, withering them down to the bone.

Or what if I killed myself? It seemed like a frightening and real possibility that if I leaned back into the chaos that surrounded me, I would float away, never to return. That I could stop myself from breathing and fade away, or else simply step into traffic and be torn into bits like a bug on a windshield. The force of my own mental energy seemed like it would be enough to light myself on fire. The slightest lapse of concentration, the slightest desire to fight the river or to cling to something in particular—it would devour me, I imagined.

Even though I felt like I could walk across dimensions all at once with the slightest impulse, peel my mind and body apart and drift between worlds and times and planes of existence, I still felt strangely miniscule, trapped, confined underneath a snow globe sky with no companion but the dead-eyed Texas moon. All became felt. All became known. All became sensible and irrational and terrible and perfect.

But in spite of the darkness, I could also detect a reason in the geometry of my surroundings, and perceive my unity with it. It was a harmony that transcended language in perpetual, dialectic silence. I felt it somehow in the deadness of the pavement, in the windblown ecstasy of the grass, and in the purgatory of the stubborn shoots of clover that erupted from cracks in the gravel. My skull was full of heat—my mind could start fires, but it can stop them just as easily. My every step and word could be at once a sword and a shield, cracking the earth apart and putting it back together. Even then, however, I was completely powerless against the great unseen river that pushed me along—a true drifter.

Or else it was just strong acid. **Very** strong acid. I shouldn't have accepted it. Real LSD is super hard to find. Maybe it was PCP. What about Dan? That time I crashed at his place and he was smoking PCP? He thought he could read my mind. Then last Halloween I saw him surrounded by police officers on the news, using a toilet paper tube to fight a six-year-old girl in a dragon costume.

ii.

Outside of the park where I'd camped, a police car blocked the road. I tuned in to their thoughts. *"Fucking weird ass shit," thinks one of them. His imagination runs wild. Last night, something terrible had happened, but that's all he knows.*

Well, that's all he remembers at least. He tuned out during the briefing. He was more concerned with his son. He'd caught the boy smoking marijuana the other night.

What about his partner? She's looking down at her phone. Sure. Let's see. Well, she's a middle-aged woman, who married young and joined the Navy. Neither of those decisions have been good ones, especially in light of her history of migraines. With her phone in her hands and headphones in her ears, she angles herself away from her partner so she can look at German bondage porn. In the back of her mind, she can't help but wonder what her partner would think if he found out she is into that. Let alone her boring, vanilla-ass husband.

Tuning out the sounds of muffled, painful German orgasms, I search through her memories. The Air Force is managing the site. (Achtung! Mein gott en Himmel!) She didn't know why, but heard something about testing a rocket. Lots of radiation. (Nein! Nein!) She wasn't allowed to know anything else, but the commanding officer had—

I bumped into the police car, not having watched where I was going. I fell over and whimpered at the pain in my shin. If nothing else, I knew that car's real.

The male officer stepped out. *His name is Phillip. He thinks I smell awful, and assumes that I expected to camp out in the field. I remind him of his son, and he worries that his poor boy will end up like me.* The woman, *whose name is Grace*, slipped out of the car. *She would very much like to handcuff me. I teetered to my feet, disturbed by her fantasy.*

"You OK there, buddy?" asked Officer Phillip.

"Y-Y-Yeah. I was distracted, sorry."

"Distracted by what?" wondered Officer Phillip.

Officer Grace mentally prepares to search me. I can't stop looking over at her, deeply uncomfortable with her sexual fantasies. **"Please don't,"** *I think towards her.* She squinted back at me, "What was that?"

Officer Phillip peeked over his shoulder, jumping, "What? Did you see something?"

"He just said something," she said.

I raised my eyebrows. "What?" I laughed, *before thinking as an aside, "I'm inside of your thoughts, Officer. Don't say anything."*

Terrified, her eyes darted back and forth. *"Is he fucking with me? Am I going crazy?" she wonders, before I flash her the image of an especially gross fish. She hates fish. She always pictures them before she has a migraine.* Wincing, she raised her hand up to her head, and breathed deeply.

Officer Phillip shook his head. "What are you doing out here this late?" he asked, intermittently glancing with concern at his partner.

He's seen what she looks at on her phone. He knows she's having problems with her marriage. Sometimes, he wants to make them worse, maybe try some of the stuff he caught her watching. But his desire to sleep with Officer Grace fills him with shame. Someone had done the same exact thing to him, just a few years ago.

"I needed somewhere to sleep . . . I camped here last night . . . what's wrong?"

Officer Phillip gulped, glancing back at Officer Grace as he tried to remember the right lie. Officer Grace gulped, gritting her teeth. *"Of course Phillip forgot," she groans internally.*

"Water main break. They need to repair the pipe."

"Can I . . . uh . . ." I tried to look as pitiful as possible.

"We aren't supposed to let anyone back there," Officer Grace snapped, rubbing her temple.

"My head doesn't hurt yet, but it's coming. Any second now. Ugh. Just my luck," she thinks.

I moved a little closer to Officer Phillip, trying to look him in the eyes. "I think I left my canteen last night . . . c-can I go look for it?"

He's hesitating. I make him think of a sermon he heard as a young boy. It comes to mind vividly, a cosmic sign urging him to remember the virtue of compassion. He glanced back at Grace.

She resents Phillip for being so soft, even though it also makes her think quite a bit about tying him up and . . . Oh God! Never mind! I backed away from her thoughts.

"I can walk with him," Officer Phillip offered.

Officer Grace sighed, too prepared for the impending migraine to do anything to stop him.

"OK," she begrudged, turning back to her phone.

iii.

Officer Phillip patted me on the shoulder—*just like he does to his son*—and walked me back towards the field.

"What's your name, buddy?"

"John. John Silvers."

He nodded. *He's being careful. Trying to remember his sensitivity training before he asks any questions that might offend me. His most terrifying nightmares either involve violating what he learned in sensitivity training or, oddly enough, a camel, which he considers to be a horrible, disgusting, and rude creature. I can only guess that it has something to do with his own self-image, which is heavily shaped by his*

sense of having been a horrible, disgusting, and rude college student.

We started trudging up a hill. "You from around here?"

"From California."

"Really? What part?"

"Sacramento area."

He looked around once we made it up the hill. I scanned the area, pretending to look for my water bottle, but really searching for any wandering mind that might explain to me what had happened.

"I was staying further back there," I lied. *He's getting nervous. I can tell we're getting close to a place we aren't supposed to be.*

"How about you?" I asked. **"Why don't you bring up your son? It sounds like it's bothering you,"** I suggest to him. *He's puzzled by the sudden arrival of this thought. He doesn't think it'd be a good idea to talk about his son. He might start crying, and he couldn't do that in front of me.*

"I'm from here. Fifth-generation Texan. So you, uhm, passing through, or what?"

"Just passing through. I—I hunt crystals."

"Crystals, huh?"

"Blue topaz here in Texas, yup."

Faintly, Officer Phillip remembers going to a rave in college. He accepted an Ecstasy pill from his friend Todd, and it turned out to be more than he bargained for. Running wild through the forest, he found a patch of ruby quartz. I couldn't help but be impressed.

Back then, he studied Art History, and his parents didn't think it was a serious career path. On the comedown from the Ecstasy, he got so depressed that he changed his major to criminal justice.

I feel uncomfortable as I realize that he envies me. Better not look any deeper. I already feel like I knew him better than his ex-wife, who'd never known about the Ecstasy.

"You can find some nice crystals around here," he said. *He remembers the ruby quartz with a touch of bittersweet nostalgia.*

"Definitely," I said, mumbling under my breath, "I f-found a lot of nice crystals around here."

Haven't found anyone yet. But I'm getting closer, I can feel it in the contours of his anxiety. And beyond him, there is a deeper tension here. No, not a tension. Death. A spiritual void. A self-consuming sorrow. It spills from the trees in a sap, it runs down the mountains. And now, well darn. It's all over my shoes.

"You step in something?"

"Death. I mean—yes. It's OK."

"You know, they got a shelter down about three miles east of here."

I looked at him. *He knows the shelter has bedbugs, not too mention broken air conditioning. Sounds like a dump. Maybe he'll admit it.*

"What's it like?"

"Not too bad," he lied, before clarifying his answer to imbue it with a sense of euphemistic truth. "Not too bad for a little town out in the hill country—but I guess I'd understand if you were more keen on staying in the great outdoors."

"I used to stay in shelters, but it made me feel guilty."

"How come?"

"I'm—"

My feet sunk into a glob of thick blue slime. I looked back over to the mountain, and then at Officer Phillip. *Collapsed into the ground up ahead is a towering, slaughtered dragon, a beast from another dimension, who had been torn up upon impact. I scratched my head in disbelief. He doesn't see it. Good.*

"What is it?" he asked, *feeling a strange, foreboding sense in his stomach.*

"What a poor creature you are . . ." Only a shred of its life force remains as it atrophies. **"Surely you once were strong, but now you are stranded in an alien world. I do not need to know your language to understand the loneliness and despair that fills your mind. Perhaps I can help you go home."** I try to pull myself into the dragon's mind. *It is dim, only barely hanging on.*

"I think I see it," I said, lying to Officer Phillip, so that I could move closer to the titanic beast. *The dragon pictures a strange world with an alien physics.*

It opens its eyes and looks at me. I bent down, extending my hand and pretending to reach for a water bottle. Our psyches become one, a painful and excruciating fusion. I feel its senses—they could not be further from earthly senses. It is terrified of this place, terrified of me.

Its consciousness is a wonderland in full bloom, but only a ghost town in its current state. "Who are you? What happened here?" It cannot understand me, but it seems to recognize me. "You saw me when you crossed over." Sorrowfully, I draw the dragon closer to me. The beast's soul, long and winding, stretches around us like a snake.

Officer Phillip is freaking out. He sees bright blue lights coming from the forest, like fairies. His heartrate keeps climbing. I can feel his fear growing behind me, looming like a storm.

I concentrate, shrinking the light until it is as small as the head of a pin, and infinitely bright. It is an excruciating task holding it together. If I try to pull that thing into my mind, it'll explode.

*So what do I do? I need to think fast. Wait, of course! **The hole in the universe.** That's where it came from!* The beast had been sucked into our world from the other side. My mind had been near the edge but had resisted the pull.

There had been someone holding me back. I cannot picture them or imagine who they might have been. I felt a wave of compassion for the dragon that I wished I could have expressed. In the end, the dragon and I had shared a common fate, both of us victims of the same disaster, both of us homeless and far away from where we belonged. Strangers, suddenly, in our own bodies.

I focus on the place where he'd come from. I find it in my mind's eye. It is sealed up. Officer Phillip watched as the sky lit up—and my soul, radiantly visible, carries the dragon upwards. We are in a dance, almost, as we move upwards, the dragon's weary heart filling with joy.

*Its body convulses as it prepares for death. Climbing and climbing into the stratosphere, we pass a city within the clouds, punctuated with intricate invisible machinery and strange forms of life, until we arrive at **the hole in the universe**, raw from the previous night, but sealed shut, seemingly. I concentrate on it. It flickers with light, and sucks the dragon back in quickly.*

iv.

My soul floods back into my body with a shockwave of bright violet light. I saw someone in the forest, watching me. I hadn't noticed him before. He had on an eagle mask, and he held a fishing pole in his hand. Seeing me return to the ground he nodded, before suddenly

A fog hung around my brain. I could not recall what had just happened, only remembering the plummet back into my body. Now, I was in the forest, and Officer Phillip was trembling. He saw the dragon before it died. His mind is wrecked with confusion. I need to clean up this mess. But how?

I know I can plant thoughts in his mind. But I'm not sure how much I can pull off. Can I erase his memory? . . . Well, it's worth a shot. I rushed back to the forest, and then knelt down, looking for a water bottle. I mimed one, forcing with all of my strength the image of a small canteen. Surely I can project illusions. I am a psychic now!

"What just happened?"

"Are you OK, man?" I asked.

He shook, wondering if his senses deceived him.

Laughing, I brushed it off, "Dude, some trippy shit happens in the forest sometimes."

Officer Phillip looked back and forth, coming to grips with the fact that he had imagined it all. The illusion held. The memory, still inchoate and unstable, drifts through the brain. I force it to a halt and then direct the young memory towards the dreaming center of the brain, where I had found the remembered dreams of sensitivity training and camels. Jolted by the sudden shift, the brain surges with activity.

He recognizes the feeling. It's like Ecstasy, but stronger. His spirit wants to leap from his body. His

senses fill with strange colors. The proportions of his limbs are magnified, and the forest comes to life with color.

"Maybe you should talk to your son or something. Like, just be chill about it," I suggested. I'd started something. Now I needed to finish it.

"I don't remember telling you about that!" he said, nauseous. He chuckled, before letting his laughter give way to a flood of cackling. I smiled, laughing a little bit myself. It felt strange to laugh. Relaxing, but strange. I couldn't resist. *A tsunami of empathy hits me like a ton of bricks and then draws me in.*

I exploded into laughter, releasing all the tension in my body. *Why haven't I laughed until now? This feels amazing!* All the pressure brought on by my new abilities melted away. ***The universe is beauty. Beauty resonates through all things. All things pour with light. It is their nature to glow.***

United in the outpouring of joyous light, I am one with the birds as they soar through the air with their spectacular plumes of rainbow colors. I am one with the trees as they pulse like wooden hearts, with the grass as it swirls into crop circle patterns. I am one with the fairies that have come out to dance with us. I am one with the toadstools in which they live. I am one with the police officer who stands before me shining with the light of a thousand stars.

I wrapped my arms around him and he embraced me. *What better thing to do when surrounded by so much beauty, so much love, so much light? We wave at the moon. We wave at the creatures made of porcelain gears and spindly frames who live in the sky. All the while, we laugh. What a joy it is to be alive!*

"My son. He was smoking some crap weed," Office Phillip cackled. "That's the shitty part too. He's risking going to jail and it's for smoking shit weed."

I let go of him. *The fairies are melting. The trees are getting sad. I cannot see the toadstools. Perhaps they were never there. I want to laugh again.* "Don't they talk about that in DARE, man? Like, how to find good weed?"

"Yeah, and then they tell you not to smoke it 'cause it'll make you too cool. God, that program. I swear that's why half the kids at that school are stoned out of their minds, and the rest are cooking biker crank out of a trailer, and shooting up heroin by 23."

How terrible things are. How grey the world has become. Where has the color gone?

"That's heavy," I said, gulping.

"I just don't want him to go through what I went through," he said, his eyes glassing over. "I just want him to get out of this town. Go get a real education at a good school somewhere. That's all I want."

"He's probably just having a hard time, man. With the divorce."

The cop frowned, looking off, tears streaming now down his face. "You're right. I just . . . wish I knew what to do."

"He probably . . . he probably wants to be like you. And he sees you as a really strong man. He just doesn't know how to approach you. He doesn't know how to express himself, or deal with girls 'cause his mom didn't set the best example, and he always thought of you as really stoic and—"

"Yeah! Yeah, exactly. Stoic and kind of, uhm. What's the word?"

"Dude. I don't know words."

He started laughing again. *Our emotions have become interwoven. I need to come to my senses.* "You don't know words!" he slapped his knee, "I mean, what are you, a dictionary?"

It's been fun to laugh. But I need to let go of this. I need to focus.

Officer Phillip repeated it, coughing from laughing so hard, "Dictionary."

"If you say it often enough, it's almost not a word," I observed, with faux profundity.

Officer Phillip froze, stupefied. *"It's true," he thought, as he stammered out the word "dictionary" over and over. "It's so true that it might be the truest thing I've heard in my life. Every other truth I have known only made this new truth truer. It is truly truer than true, true in the profoundest, and most true way I can imagine."*

With him distracted in this meandering current of truth, I spotted a pair of headlights rushing down from the top of the mountain. *The faintest thought comes from the distant car, tinged with panic. "It happened again."*

I turned to Office Phillip. *He's having an epiphany—a strong one. It's hard not to get pulled back in.* I hated to think I'd have to pull him out of it. I hated to think that I'd have to take away what I'd said to him, or the emotional release he had experienced.

But the headlights had stopped at the edge of the field, and now the doors were opening. *And from their thoughts, I know that something terrifying just happened. Some kind of radiation signature came from the field, which matched the signature from the night before. They must discover the source and contain it.* I saw the glimmer of someone's glasses. *A deep orange aura hovers behind them like a flickering candle.* I reached out to him, feeling my soul leave my body and settled just behind his ear. *He can't see us.* We were hidden by the trees, but we needed to move soon.

Phillip is getting scared now. We're emotionally linked somehow. I can't tell if it's him or me. But I'm making it worse. He can't tell that I'm out of my body.

"You slip me something?" he asked. *He hears his speech slurring. The fear is getting stronger.*

I look into the thoughts of the military officer, on whose shoulder I am perched as an astral body, trying not to get distracted. The officer's mind seems unstable. He's both horrified and zealously excited. His name is Barry Ramirez and he joined the Air Force twenty years ago. He has an above-top-secret security clearance. He helps design satellites. This is a space project, although not related to aliens, really. I—

Officer Phillip came closer to me, sniffing my body. "You give me something? Huh? Answer me! I'm not stupid."

He wants to hit me with his nightstick or take me down with his stun gun. I need to get back. I race to my body as Officer Phillip, losing control of his emotions, reaches to his side. I land in my skull just as his hand meets the edge of his belt, and flood my consciousness over his, holding him still. Calm down. Remember the feeling you had walking through the art gallery in Dallas. The silence of that building. The colors of the walls.

I knew not to touch the part of the brain that could make a memory into a dream—not while someone was awake. *I withdraw my powers from him.* I not only weakened the boundaries between the zones of his mind, but activated the dreaming center of the brain, forcing him into a psychedelic state not unlike psilocybin or, well, LSD, I guess. *He's confused. At least none of that went into his long-term memory . . . it's all gone now.*

"I found the water bottle," I said.

Or so I thought. *It's not there. I guess illusions are harder than I thought.*

"It would've been about this big," I clumsily added.

The officer sniffed. *He feels like he's coming down off Ecstasy all over again, and can't quite remember what happened. It's all blank, fuzzy, and distorted.*

As we stumbled back to the car, I gave the water bottle illusion one last time. *I think I need to grab the brain from the back, near the neck. Maybe that's it.* I held up my hand again. *It's working! They believe it!*

Officer Phillip mumbled something to Officer Grace about the military searching the forest before he climbed into the car. Between the thoughts of the people in the woods and the thoughts of the officers, I could piece together a story. *They made a **wormhole**, or something like that, trying to put a satellite into orbit around Mars. Something went wrong. It must have cut into another dimension. It released an unknown energy, which they now tentatively refer to as **Gamma Triple Prime**.*

*Everyone there that night had been killed, save one scientist: Dr. Whitebalm. Dr. Whitebalm collapsed after the accident since she'd been in another room. Now the soldiers are returning to the field, after a burst of **Gamma Triple Prime** was unexpectedly detected, in order to sweep the area with Geiger counters, and detect the residual radiation.*

v.

Walking away, I felt like I could collapse from exhaustion. My vision was going black, interpolated with strange fractals zooming out from whatever I looked at. Whirlpools of interconnected headlights and stop signs came at me in an unending kaleidoscope. I could hardly walk straight. The rigorous mental exercise through which I'd put myself was almost too much to bear now.

The power was still there, overwhelming, but my thoughts were losing their vital force, instead giving way to a surge of dream-tinged, chaotic energy. I wanted to collapse into it and float away, though I did not know where.

I stumbled down a hill and ended up near a slow-moving creek. Shaking, I tried to lap up the water. Probably unsanitary, I imagined, but it helped me stabilize enough to realize a little bit too late that I still had an unopened water bottle in my pack. Perhaps I'd committed too hard to the idea that the water bottle was missing earlier. I climbed back up to the road and followed it, unsure of where I was going, sleeping intermittently and keeping myself on path through intuition.

I found, eventually, a little thicket, guarded by a small bit of barbed wire marking the edge of a ranch. No one was around. I quietly set down my bag and pulled out my blue topaz crystal. Blue topaz symbolizes eternity. And now it signified an eternal trip—

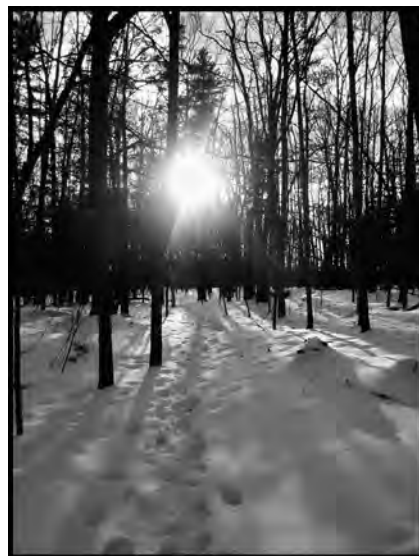
I didn't quite have the heart to let it go, but only the vaguest inclination to hold on. It dangled before me, back and forth, swinging with the kinesis of my indecision. The tracers forming in its path filled my vision—

Swiftly, I became lost in a haze of visual echoes, symphonic colors which hummed in a drone about my head. Sleep seemed so inviting. I wanted to dream about normal life. Real perceptions. What it felt like to watch a car drive by without seeing tracers, or to walk through the forest without feeling its breathing. I missed it already.

I wanted to throw the topaz into the river, but I knew that, maybe, it could do someone some good. I fell asleep with it clutched in my hand.

To be continued in Cenacle | 112 | June 2020

* * * * *





Martina Newberry

Espresso

This afternoon, my thoughts fall all over each other,
trying to get to the *Sabor y Cultura* Café.

My little eye winks, and my nose runs,
and my thoughts trip over their own feet.

We'll have espresso curled in our cups like some black metal
waiting to become gold. Jefe is outside nursing

the morning's large coffee. He sells almost anything:
Homegrown, Marching Dust, Ready Rock, Blue Mollies.

His pockets flare with small sheets of foil, cheap lighters,
alligator clips, and papers frail as aging skin.

There is a pigeon at Jefe's feet. It stays with him most of the day,
wanting a crumb of croissant or cupcake.

The shadows are not long at *Sabor y Cultura*. It is either day or night there.
None of this aluminum twilight shit.

Sabor knows there are only two times in a day,
so I got here with my sharpened pencils and my nagging cough.

My thoughts are fragile brushstrokes on Hollywood Boulevard's
dirty stretched canvas.

The day's leaves fall without a sound
the way strong winds fall and see themselves out,

the way a stem cringes when you set a match to it,
the way Jefe takes his leave of us: here today, gone today.

* * *

What Is

Stars are white moths.
They chew through the night sky
until it is eaten up—more holes than sky
and then it is morning again.

Fire is every love affair lost.
It burns through bodies,
leaves ashes waiting for
a Phoenix to rise and take flight

Water is sound.
Words tumbling over each other, words speaking
to words, flashing silver back at the sky,
dousing rocks and souls, hands and mouths.

Earth is a ravenous animal.
It devours everything that steps on it:
rain, petals, lightning, footsteps, spit, tears, blood.
All that touches it becomes a banquet.

Wind is the reminder of love,
of grief, of fear, of longing, of pain, of lungs
filling with the breath of need to speak truly,
the ability to carry what moves below the canyons.

* * *

The Most Beautiful Suicide

Evelyn McHale, Bookkeeper, May 1, 1947

86 floors up, the view from the
Empire State Building Observation Deck
shows a Legoland city. Brick atop brick.

Brick atop brick, concrete blocks wedged
and plastered together—miles of it—
and there you have the city,

the cold, hard city, where Evelyn McHale
breathed her last. Clouds are not much cushion
for meteors or for determined jumpers.

A determined jumper, she dismissed her fiancé's
proposal, wracked her brain for reasons,
came to the dark conclusion that she was not

(a dark conclusion indeed) good wife material.
Evelyn left a short note saying no one should
see her body. *Women!* said one cop,

after seeing her body. *Always worrying*
about their looks. Of course she was,
we always are; never wishing our realness,

the realness of our naked faces, on anyone.
Evelyn left her small brown makeup kit
at the site of her jump, ever mindful that

the site of her jump was windy, mindful of
what stiff breezes and tears can do to
mascara and lipstick. Her own mother,

her own sad, quirky mother, had left them all—
father, brothers and sisters, and her.

Mental illness, is what they said was the reason

and, after hearing *mental illness*, she kept
close watch on her own thoughts.

Women were often suspected, were treated

(were secluded and treated) as if they were crazy:
shyness, worry, anger, fear, menopause,
Empty Nest Syndrome, insomnia,

and insomnia-driven exhaustion—
all of it went under the umbrella of
female hysteria, the weak mindedness of women.

Perhaps, Evelyn thought, she was weak-minded.
That was too sad to think about, but maybe . . .
Evelyn might have been unclear about some things,

unclear about many things, but she knew
what was said about her mother
and sure as hell didn't want it said about her,

didn't want it said about what she was about to do.
She wrote that she had too many of her
mother's tendencies. To avoid that, she jumped.

Jumped—but first folded her good gray coat
over the railing next to her makeup bag—then landed
on a parked limousine, makeup and clothes intact.

* * * * *



Tamara Miles



Church in the Greenhouse

[Pandemic Journal]

*First day in the greenhouse,
I planted peonies that may not bloom this year,
but they will bloom in fire when they rise,
all shouts and colors,
canticles of memory,
passion in the turned soil of grief.*

March 16, 2020

This Church is Open

Hello everyone,

I'm writing in a time of quarantine for the coronavirus, COVID-19. I have never had an experience like this one, though other folks have, of course. Many years ago, the world was beset by such plagues as this, and did not fare as well as we have so far.

I may write about medieval plagues and the church at some point, but today I'm opening my own church door for any believers or seekers or unbelievers who want to see what it's all about. My home church is a little greenhouse attached to my house and, so far, I'm the only full-time human member. I have guests though, occasionally, and they include both people and other creatures.

For example, Fernando and Poncho, two toads who have made my acquaintance. Fine fellows. Also, I have many slugs who are eating their share of my greens. I haven't given them names, but this is a matter of prejudice that I need to address. Add to that the itinerant mosquito and other flying insects, a stinkbug or two, and earthworms. I imagine before too long a rabbit will find its way in there, as I've started leaving the greenhouse door open on these warmer days of March.

What I mean to say is welcome!

In this journal, I want to talk about church. That's my overarching theme. I don't promise that I won't go far and wide and deep within that theme—so far that you may have to give me a nudge and say, "What does this have to do with church?"

And that is an excellent question I've been asking myself too, given all the divisions that exist within and without churches today. This is part of the reason I don't go to actual churches much anymore, though I grew up *in church*. I call myself a recovering Southern Baptist, and that's only a little tongue-in-cheek.

So . . . I'm opening the door. Come in any time, and sit on one of my red pillows. There are no other pews. This is a tiny church. See you soon.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

March 19, 2020

When the Roof Caves In . . .

Hello everyone,

Two nights ago, while I was sleeping, a heavy rainfall crushed the greenhouse roof, which was not much more than PVC pipes and plastic. Whenever we thought it was going to rain, we would reinforce the roof with these pipes, but we didn't know it was raining that night. Isn't that just how it goes? The rain comes, the roof falls, while you're sleeping.

No fear, congregation. As I was taught, the church isn't the building. It's the creatures who inhabit it, in a spirit of community and grace and all good things. Only a few of the plants were bruised and disorganized but, well glory . . . *everything is alright*. Look here, new green shoots, new under-feathering, leaves widening and spreading. *We are alive*.

Reminds me of one of my favorite poems, "Sestina," by Elizabeth Bishop. It is a hymn really—because what is a hymn but an act of praise, a song, a poem? These beautiful lines especially:

*Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.*

Yes, time to plant tears among the joyful green. We are a nation in a world of hurt right now, with a virus spreading itself like a poisonous vine. We are the inverse, too, a world on the first day of spring, waiting to sprout new life.

We are at once fragile and fearless. The sun is out, and I feel brave today. I hope you do, too. This is a church of the brave. Enjoy those beautiful lines and feel the rain. Plant the tears. Pray in the way you know how. See you soon under a new roof.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

March 21, 2020

Entwined

Hello everyone,

I've come out to the greenhouse at 10:30 this morning to admire the pole bean plants and how

they endlessly seek an entwining, an interweaving. Three plants have crossed their borders and meandered over to the pots of others. No one seems to be complaining or protesting the breach.

I see also the work I need to do, and begin to lift the piles of leaves I've plucked and carelessly tossed on the floor. I've pulled these leaves because they have been scavenged by hungry creatures. Pests, I might call them, if I am without compassion for those who don't know my rules.

They've left ugly holes. Displeased, I snip and toss.

I don't stay with that feeling long because of all the beauty that remains. I move the pots around, directing them as if they were a choir, and see how much stronger they are when they are gathered. *What's this?* The parsley's coming up. It's the first thing that has worked in the special herb planter, except for milk thistle, and I understand milk thistle will grow anywhere.

I sip my lemon probiotic tea. The kale looks good, and the cauliflower plants are growing just fine, still drizzled with water from last night's bath. I discovered the *flower* setting on my sprinkler, and it creates a fine mist that makes the greenhouse feel like a jungle. The plants and I love it.

The gardener can't sit long . . . so much weeding to do, and the floor to be swept. It's a stone floor with a couple of old yoga mats for comfort. The nasturtium is coming up—I planted that because slugs are supposed to prefer it to my cabbage plants. Several small pots I think hold beet seedlings—I plant so much I forget what I have.

A mint green painted metal angel created by a friend named Provie Musso, years ago, has become a pot decoration to accompany me. I read online that she is living in Killen, Alabama now, making her studio filled with found objects (colorful pieces of fabric, rough tiles from broken ceramic bowls, raw wood, and so on) into altars.

Whoops, I've spilled the pot, and soil has tumbled out. The choir of beans does not curse me or resent me for it. The angel does not withhold its affection, grumble, or give me the silent treatment. That would interfere with its healing work. I am learning much from today's sermon . . .

And behold the chair with its Sunday-best cardinal-red cushion. Oh, and that rusty-headed fellow with golden legs (might be an ordained wasp). If the back row beans, the ones who ended up with the prized location in which to climb up the lattice, are gossiping among themselves, they at least have the good grace to do it with subtlety.

If you have had enough of this anthropomorphism, you might go watch the news instead. Come back when you want communion.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

March 22, 2020

Why Don't You Come On In This House?

Hello everyone,

What was it you wanted to say? I've been listening and hoping to hear you. I'm up early on a Sunday morning. I've been out to the greenhouse and sat in the mostly dark for about thirty minutes, with only a little light from the fountain to guide me. The wind blew and gently shook the greenhouse walls, and occasionally the dogs barked.

I have been listening to old time gospel music because I'm in the mood for it. Georgia Mass Choir singing:

*When the war is over,
we're gonna have a time.*

Aren't we? *We're at war with a virus*, folks are saying. But when it's over, *there will be joy*.

GMC's "Joy" is so beautiful it gives me chills—my friend Robin says that means my spirit is bearing witness:

*Early in the morning,
before the break of day,
I asked the Lord
to make me whole.
He holds me and
the Lord keeps me
(Oh joy!)*

And, in fact, I know what it means to be joyful this morning, with my cup of decaf coffee anointed by a bit of turmeric, sitting by the fireplace. Well, I can't stay in the greenhouse *all the time*. Although if I could put a bed out there I might take a good long nap sometimes, or read to the tomato plants, who need a little nudge, or to the ordained wasp straddling my cabbage stem. As my friend Rob said, his sermons are pointed.

I've been reading *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks* (Sarah Crichton Books, 2016) by Terry Tempest Williams, and *Earthly Delights: Gardening by the Seasons the Easy Way* (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004) by Margot Rochester.

Williams' writing makes me long to lie down in green pastures and quit my job. Go traveling through all of our beautiful national parks, each one a cathedral, each one with an ethos and a call to something pure and grand in each of us.

Rochester's writing employs a tone that makes me smile. She's not deadly serious about gardening—calls herself a *lazy gardener*. She doesn't water the garden much, and she doesn't do composting that requires any labor. *My kind of gardener*.

But she does understand the seasons and what will grow in each, and that is a lesson I really need. She was a South Carolina gardening writer and speaker who died in 2008. I wish I had known her. Now

I will, in a way. She “tended a 1-acre garden” in Lugoff, just ’round the corner from me (I live in Elgin). She was also a past president of South Carolina Teachers of English, a sister indeed.

Her body went back to the soil, but her spirit is alive and well in this Church in the Greenhouse.

And we, too, are alive, in a strange time. Take a deep breath now, and speak from your own brave heart.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

March 25, 2020

Is There a Doctor in the Greenhouse?

Hello everyone,

Why, yes, there is. I made it. I’m Dr. Miles as of this morning! EdD in Higher Education Leadership. Thank you to everyone who believed in me!

I’m out in the greenhouse 5:30 this morning to tell the congregation, but the cabbage plants are too sleepy to care, and the lilies have their own ambitions—they will bloom any day now. *Any day now.*

We have to keep believing, no matter how sad it gets in the world, even with the poor souls in Italy burying the dead every day. I read that a priest gave up his ventilator to someone younger, a stranger . . . and, as a result, he died:

Don Giuseppe Berardelli, 72, was the archpriest of Casnigo, a town in northern Italy about 50 miles northeast of Milan.

I’m listening to the magical voice of Alan Johnson at *The Poet’s Narrative*, sharing the medical news from where he is, and mentioning how his garden soothes him. The garden has its own narrative, its story of persistence in difficult soil, or too much rain, or not enough. Or of an absent-minded gardener. I am not the only one of those, it seems. Others forget to water too.

Now, with my doctorate, am I officially an absent-minded professor?

Let’s pay attention, not only to our gardens, but to each other. Let’s be vigilant about our love and caring. The world needs it. And to everyone who is making sacrifices, small or large ones, you are making something bloom. *Any day now.*

*Love from my little church in the greenhouse,
Blessings too,
Tamara*

* * *

March 26, 2020

Cultivating Love and Other Fruits

Good morning, my *sangha*.

"I hope everyone here is in love"

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

There are two primary uses for the word *cultivating*:

- 1) to prepare ground for crops or gardening; and
- 2) to try to acquire or develop a quality, sentiment, or skill (in the self or others).

We might try to cultivate, for example, love, compassion, altruism, liberation, gratitude, and/or empathy in our personal gardens . . . along with strawberries.

So . . . I'm out here in the greenhouse at 6 this morning, doing both. I'm listening to a *Dharma Talk* called "Cultivating True Love," by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. He began the talk by inviting his father to join.

Thay, as he is affectionately called by his sangha, is 93 years old, so his father is long dead. The idea is that our ancestors are still part of our lives. "When we want to see them," he says, "we need only look into the palms of our hands." We can not only remember them, but develop empathy for them.

"Breathing in, I invite my mother to join me," and also in the breathing out, he instructs. "This body is mine, but it is also yours, mother."

Yes. I've invited my mother to sit with me in the greenhouse this morning, and I know she is here. She laughs at my disorganized garden; she rejoices in wonder at how it grows and thrives.

"Breathing in, I invite Jesus to breathe with me. Breathing out, I invite the Buddha in me to breathe also."

The intention of loving is not enough, Thay reminds us. We must know *how*. We must know how to *cultivate* the people we love. We cannot impose *our* idea of happiness on the other person. We have to understand a person before we can make him or her happy. We must develop compassion for that person, and hope to remove his pain and suffering. This is a personal principle, but it is also a community principle, suitable for leaders of any community.

"The last element of true love," explains Thay, "is inclusiveness. There is no personal property in love." When we cultivate people, we have to release our possessiveness along with our judgments.

"The practitioner should be a true lover," Thay says. "If you think that the kingdom of God is just an idea," he continues, "that you will only experience when you die, you are wrong. It is available in the here and the now. If you are truly present, mindful, then you can touch the kingdom of God in everything, even your own body, or in a flower. The kingdom is there in every step, in every moment. You need a friend to remind you of that."

I've been out here in the blue light of my Church in the Greenhouse for a short time, and I'm already breathing easier, feeling calmer. Feeling grateful. *Feeling reminded.*

“When you look into the sun,” observes Thay, “you see the father, you see the mother . . . as a biologist, you can look into the body of a person and see that he is the continuation of his parents . . . their cells, their imagination.”

I see my mother today, and I know she cultivated everything good in me that I contain. I am grateful and, in my gratitude, I wish you everything good as well. *What will you cultivate today?*

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

April 08, 2020
Sound Bath

Hello everyone,

I woke up troubled today—uneasy in the mind, restless, searching for a way to feel better—when I remembered a new audio-book I’d gotten called *Sound Bath*. Within the first few seconds on introductory sounds, I began to feel more hopeful. The practice is called psycho-acoustics.

What is a sound bath? By definition, it’s an immersive experience involving being quiet and listening to meditative sounds that include Himalayan singing bowls and other pleasing tonal instruments.

But here, I’m extending it to the sounds of nature, at home, involving only the practice of paying attention to the birds, wind, chimes, leaf-rustles, or whatever pleasant visitors to my home. I’m a morning bird-listener and, even now at 4:44 in the morning, I am waiting with anticipation for the first songs of the day. Something in me eases, loosens, brightens when I hear them.

My sound temple is the greenhouse. I do have one Tibetan singing bowl, which I treasure, but when I want soothing, I can begin with no instruments at all except the birds. It helps to have three bird feeders bursting with wild birdseed.

In her book *Beautiful Voyager*, Deborah Pena explains some of the benefits of bird songs:

It invokes positive memories. Bird sounds associated with enjoyable or special events help combat stress and anxiety and can ease depressive episodes, as it creates positive emotions linked with particular places and times. It shifts the focus. Listening to bird music during trying times moves the focus away from the problems at hand and leads to calm. It is a change of stimuli. We get used to the everyday sounds of city life. When we listen to bird music, it provides a break from the emotions associated with our surroundings. This short reprieve will help reduce stress. It’s a welcome distraction Bird music has the ability to effortlessly take you out of your current environment without you having to move a muscle.

This book is one of my cherished possessions. It helps identify birds by song, and is so fun to listen to. It’s like learning the choir members’ names and recognizing them as they enter the sanctuary of my yard.

I will be out in the greenhouse today, continuing to clear the bed, transplant the remaining plants into

the new beds outside, and starting many new bulbs and seeds. I will be accompanied by the birds' choir.

If you're a beginning bird watcher and listener, like me, you might try out your own sound bath sometime.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * *

April 12, 2020

Sunrise Service Has Gone to the Dogs

Hello everyone,

Good morning, congregants and other lovers. I'm having an Easter sunrise service on the back deck with the dogs, God bless them. The sad old phrase, *gone to the dogs*, has a new delightful meaning to me. It usually means things turned out badly, or it refers to people such as criminals and *bad eggs* who were sent away to live among the *lower* creatures as the prodigal son of the Bible did.

Here, however, these two beastie boys are my fine, royal guests at the Easter tea table and divine yoga mat.

Look here—we're hurting all over the world today, but still we find love shining over us. My scripture reading this morning is from a book called *For the Love of God: Handbook for the Spirit* (New World Library, 1997) by Dr. Benjamin Shield:

I began to see how in prehistoric societies it was much easier to be connected directly to the divine. Everything was divine, including nature. The Goddess gave life, and at death life returned to her womb like the cycle of vegetation, to be reborn. They didn't have our current artificial distinction between spirituality and nature, with man and the spiritual seen as above woman and nature in the hierarchy.

I remember the love of Christ, and his gentle spirit, and his sacrifice on this day, and I honor all the people who are sacrificing their time with their loved ones, and putting their lives on the line for others in hospitals and other places. I also remember how Jesus prayed in the garden alone.

It's a little chilly outside this morning, and my toes are cold. I'm going to keep this short and follow the vision of Emily Dickinson, who kept church at home. "*The soul selects her own society.*"

May your hopes rise . . . may you feel more alive as you meet this day.

*Blessings,
Tamara*

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Many Musics

Twelfth Series

*"I tell you, there are more worlds,
and more doors to them,
than you will think of in many years!"
— George MacDonald, Lilith, 1895.*

Art she dances alone,
the world her loneliness at partner,
crowds sometimes near,
sometimes watching,
often not,

Art she remembers,
by glints & melodies,
moves the world moves her,
moves near, moves away,
down & up & out,

Art she reaches,
to a like or novel touch,
for a taste like breathlessness,
a scent her bones know better
than her rest,

Art she loves chocolate & kisses,
& rusted skylines,
& ideas of loving new & ancient,
burst of wild clock
& slow . . . to . . . no . . . time,

Art she lives & mourns & bores
 & wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
 & skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel
 stretching far,

Art & I love you.
 Art & I dance you.
 Art & you spit me, & smile.
 Art & you gesture me near,
 nearer, a breath's closest . . .
Art, you gesture me on!



To be continued in Cenacle | 112 | June 2020





Nascent Black-Market Entrepreneurship and the Tides of the Sun

[Travel Journal]

Nascent Black-Market Entrepreneurship

I've traveled back to the Secoya village of San Pablo to pick up a letter from Álvaro Piaguaje, the president of the tribal organization, for the Ministry of External Relations in Quito. Currently rocking like a tall, pale pendulum in a nylon hammock in his hut while Álvaro cuts up a *sabalo* fish he caught for our dinner.

An hour upstream from Supernatura, San Pablo scares me because of local opposition to *yagé* drinking. *Yagé* is illegal under the laws of the community, though not under the laws of the country. The Barclays, the missionary couple from the United States, convinced most people here that *yagé* drinking was primitive, evil, a way of worshipping the Devil. A few old men like Joaquín, Jerónimo, and Lázaro still do it because they don't accept the tribal organization's authority to tell them what to do. They drink *yagé* at risk to their personal safety; people here are still being killed for suspicion of witchcraft. San Pablo is where Geraldo Piaguaje was gunned down two years ago, while sitting in his hammock eating a plate of rice and fish, for supposedly killing a woman with a magic dart.

Álvaro's not a *yagé* drinker but, as one of Serafin's sons, he seems to respect the tradition. At the same time, he's suspicious of Joaquín.

So it's official: I'll teach English here for three months in return for the letter of application for a volunteer visa, and—the unspoken part of my deal with Álvaro—tacit permission from the community to drink *yagé* with my teacher.

* * *

It's a warm summer night in Venezuela just south of the border with Texas. After acting in a play, I climb over a banquet table, laden with food, where friends are sitting. I enter my cabin, flick on the dim bulb, sit down and take off my red Converse All-Star low-top sneakers.

In front of me is a big window, no glass, just wire screen to keep the bugs out, five feet high and eight wide. A miniature Milky Way galaxy zooms past the window, bright with its spiral arms of stars. Then there's a flurry of bats, first the sight of them, then the sound of their cries and the rush of their wings.

I woke in the lower bunk of a bunk bed in the common sleeping room of the Catholic Foundation in Lago Agrio. Before rising, I mused: *Galaxy? Bats?*

One was the other's reflection, they were time-warped reincarnations of one another, both were masks worn by the same deeper self: they were Noni and me, they were the author and the reader, and vice-versa . . .

On my way back to Quito with my two baby boas and the letter that Álvaro wrote requesting a volunteer visa for me, I'm enjoying the smooth glide of a new blue Bic ballpoint pen over the smooth paper, like skating on freshly-resurfaced ice.

* * *

I'm back in Quito, the city in the sky; back in Guapulo, the neighborhood like a rabbit warren designed by M.C. Escher; back at the Hostal Labirinto, the nucleus of the neighborhood's lively bohemian community.

It's just past midnight and I'm making modest progress on my methodical way through two very different materials: a fragrant bud of what the Secoyas call *watí muntóh*, spirit tobacco, which I'm smoking in one of the ceramic pipes that my host and friend Ché made; and *The Yagé Drinker*, Francisco Piaguaje's autobiography, which I'm translating.

I just finished the part where the old shaman stipulates how he wants to be buried. "Don't put me in a box of nailed boards like a white man," he tells his grandsons. "A *yagé* drinker should be dressed in his best clothes and his face painted with *nuní*." That's the plant Joaquín said has the power to repel the Devil, the plant on the other side of which, two years ago, in my visions, I saw Old Scratch himself.

"Dig a big hole," Francisco says, "and put me in it, lying in my hammock. Over the top of the hole, put some palm wood boards and then a thin layer of dirt. I'm going to get to my feet at midnight and rise up to follow the path I've taken so many times before up to the sky."

Francisco adds that people don't have to be afraid of his power after he dies. The death of a strong drinker usually provokes seismic tremors, but he will make sure this doesn't happen.

This sounds like crazy talk to me. But, as Joaquín once rhetorically inquired, *what do I know?*

* * *

I got the visa from the Ministry of External Relations, then went to a reptile zoo, where the French director, whose neat mustache and goatee made his face look exactly like that of a snake, sold me two mice and advised me to free my baby boas once I get back to the jungle. That's fine. Rufino once told me that once boas have gotten used to being around people, they'll never attack us.

Back at the Hostal Labirinto, Rumi accidentally locked the keys in the kitchen. He and Ché and Mauro stood around scratching their heads. I thought, "What the fuck is wrong with these guys?" I scrambled up on the roof, flipped down over the edge, wriggled in the open window, and let Rumi in, to general acclaim.

Mauro remarked, "You remind me of myself when I was smoking a lot of cocaine. I was really thin and had tons of energy."

Of course, my silent reaction was, "But my drugs are better than your drugs."

At the moment, I'm using a few of my tons of energy to organize a small, informal jungle tour. I know some people who know some people who want to go visit an indigenous community in the jungle. I think it can happen.

Ché loves the boas. When his hangover isn't too bad, he brings them out on the terrace with him while he has breakfast and lets them slither over him. If I can get this tour off the ground, I'll hire him as a cook.

* * * * *

The Tides of the Sun

Guapulo, Quito, 12:57 p.m., December 24. A couple hours ago, I drank a tall glass of green star soup left over from the night at María's place. The day's passing really fast. I'm staying in an apartment belonging to Ché's Australian girlfriend Christine while she and he are visiting the coast.

I cleaned the kitchen and did my laundry by hand all morning. Now I'm writing, and watching my pair of two-month-old boa constrictors. The wide boa, who ate two mice yesterday, is halfway out of the wicker basket. The narrow boa, who wasn't hungry, shrank away from the sun, has white-lidded eyes. Is she sick?

The couch-side clock says 12:59. A car drives by outside. *Which way?* I don't know. Up the steep street.

On the sunny terrace behind the apartment, my damp clothes wave in the wind. *El Comisariato*, says a plastic bag I hung up to dry. *What could it mean?*

Objects talk in silent voices. 13:00. The cover of Christine's *Marie Claire* magazine says things like *£50,000 Worth of Free Gifts—Including Designer Fashion & Beauty Products*, and *Sex expectations: The rules of affairs*.

But, my dear magazine, it's got to be pointed out that affairs are unruly. I know. I was in one. 13:02.

Boa moving around slightly, *what's he-slash-she looking-at-slash-thinking-about, anyway?* I wonder about this. 13:03. Coughing green phlegm in the back of my throat healthy! *Mariri*. Scratchmyneck listen to piano music flowing out of the radio next door, the clank of this apartment's metal front door when a gust comes through, the unrhythmic crinkle of that *El Comisariato* plastic bag flexing in the breeze, little girl next door calling her *Mamá*, a rooster crows, a car starts up, rolls by, in neutral, downhill down the stone paved street, it's 13:05. A car is beeping now, and there's a throb of unknown music on a car stereo. There's that piano music, then the whistling, suddenly, of Christmas Eve fireworks. Four or five whistle as they fall, up above.

The model's face on the cover of *Marie Claire* stares out at me with live eyes.

Under the wide windows rests the beloved, comfortable, broken-down, indestructible plaid couch. My notebooks and novels are lying on it, fast asleep.

It's 13:11. *Newsflash*: the boa with two mice inside has turned around, heading back into the basket, moving as if in slow motion as I write these words! It's like a 3-D *Discovery Channel* in here! Wild, wild animals on the little table by the couch! 13:13. Why are these minutes flying by so fast? Stop. Cut. Freezeframe. Slowdown. Stop. My neck aches. A plane's flying by overhead, or is that a truck with no muffler? Pause to breathe, scratch, write about the gooseflesh on my arms—*simbolo convencional, leyenda explicativa*—to borrow a couple phrases from the map of Ecuador on the wall.

At 13:17, on the street, women laughing! A man yells *Ho!* A young girl screams in fun, then purrs! A wolf whistle! A purr! Movement of pipes in water, water in pipes: Fabian, the downstairs neighbor, is taking a shower. Animal noises by the kids in the street. 13:19.

I turn to a fresh page in my notebook. Outside, a wolf whistle, a whistling wolf! Another! A yelp and a catlike, birdlike purr!

A chill melts down my back. I turn and watch, through the window, a gathering of gray clouds. There's to be no more sun today, it seems. An airplane is coming from the north . . . and . . . now it is going away, south, into the city over the high apartment buildings on Avenida Gonzalez Suarez. 13:20. I'm going to put on my shirt and bring the laundry inside.

Ten years ago, I flicked a lighter flame to light her way as she stood up, wet with bathwater, to get a candle off the sink—but that's another story. This is journalism of yelps on the street where you can't tell if it's a human or another animal making the noise, and the black ink plunges red and green onto the page, mentioning kings and wars and fountain pens, and the sun's out again and we all think and we all think and she or he purrs and mimics a seagull with uncanny accuracy—or *is* it a bird and *not* a child? Dogs yelping, fighting, woofing under the sun, that's certainly genuinely canine. I wonder what my old friends are doing at this moment. Got to make a mental note to myself not to make any more mental notes to myself.

I just went upstairs to organize books and clothing, moving around in this fantastic body as if I'd just received it out of the air, a conjuring trick.

That kid makes unusual noises, almost unreal. Experimenting with chirping purrs, human life is never going to die! *Yelp!* 13:35 a baby is carried past my front door, burbling, we're all on the same wavelength, somehow, including Fabian the downstairs neighbor, a ballet dancer from Paraguay who recently got back from a month and a half in the Dominican Republic, and just put on some music,

or somebody did, indistinct, general, like a heartbeat. There went that baby again, and off goes a dog, ¡*Guaú, guaú, guaú!*, and an airplane cometh, and my back aches somewhat, and, and, and, it's 13:38.

Close the snake basket and go outside. Cumbaya and Tumbaco, the towns in the valley out there, are veiled by mist. I'm out on the terrace now, biting my lower lip and feeling the breeze ruffle the fur on my legs. Fleeting melody of a songbird crossing the heaven-sky. A *ventarrón* or big wind blew one of the blankets I was airing out right off the wall but, fortunately, it landed on the other terrace below instead of in the ravine—it's a *cosmic wavelength flowerpot thing, man*. Sooner or later I'm going to have to face it.

Tranquil, serene mountains in the purple distance stress out sometimes just like the rest of us—it just takes place over hundreds of thousands of years.

You know, once in a while, I feel like I'm starting to make sense. Existing, man. Getting played like an accordion by the cosmic flow. Sometimes it's angels, sometimes it's olive oil, or a crushed, empty box of Marlboro Lights, the tunes I play.

Metallic noises of empty barrels clank up from the valley, *bang, bong!* And the next door neighbors are playing agreeable music. They're standing out on their terrace, conversing. There's laughter. It's a fine, gleaming day. The earth smiles. The music is Arabic, exhilarating.

The neighbors are Quichuas, mountain Indians. He's telling in Spanish about something that happened in the Supermaxi supermarket, and the women laugh! A giant cloud shadow looms goofily up the wooded hill at the other side of this nearer valley. Half the world plays the clown, half the world is laughing. A car alarm goes off, comical, on the soundtrack of the day, suddenly becomes an ear-sore, and is shut off.

Ow . . . colors are frying in the sun, melting, running all over my vision. The huge sun bears down on our tiny earth. The crinkling of that plastic bag on the line behind me, I'd better not do anything about it until I'm really annoyed.

At last, it's 14:00. I can breathe easy again. And then a vulture's breathtaking glide takes my breath away over air currents that rise beyond my red sneakers in the valley.

Hot sunlight on the page, on the body. The neighbors' radio is playing Coolio's "Gangsta Paradise," for which I'm glad. Gangstas are shooting in Los Angeles at this moment, swelling throngs in Heaven and Hell; vultures are zipping through the air between my body's eyes and the cement bridge far off across the river below; a fly kissed my knuckle as if I were already dead. Vultures fly, crooked and high, and my body glows like a filament when the current of the sun goes through it. Holy chorus of paradise rises up like a prayer and fades out.

A housefly like Tupac Shakur on the page, the sun's reflection in my thumbnail, the sunlight glancing off the length of the Bic pen to shimmer in the shadow of my writing hand. Mournful music next door, the man's gone, a woman's alone, scrubbing something with a brush, isn't that always the way. Photons collide with molecules at the surface of my skin, potentially threatening ultraviolet damage. I'm too hot, unbutton my shirt, a bird calls, and I approach the end of this poem, and death. It's these city streets I've been walking up and down, how can they not make a human tense? All that noise and exhaust crying out at the sky. Which, itself, ends up being, just as it was before, inexplicably, blue.

The clouds are alive today. Pouring themselves into each other. Moving fast, rolling and unrolling, like a special effect. The dance of levitating water. Levitation's a great thing to do, but how? I'm sitting on the living room floor now, mostly water, not levitating. It's 14:21. There's the snake basket right next to the clock. There's the *Marie Claire* magazine. There's the broken-down, indestructible plaid couch with my notebooks and novels sleeping on it. That purring kid purrs outside. It's a jungle out there.

Someone just rang the doorbell.

* * * * *



My Woman, My Land

My woman:

Worn out by fingering hands,
as if she's not the jewel
that held suitors out—

My land.

My woman:

The fabled laughter of her youth,
before the sun went nude,
her tulips waning like the moon—

My land.

My woman:

Enchanted, her vista,
lovesome, her horizon,
I laid near her crib for a nap,
clothed with verdure,
her sweet splendor—

My land.

My woman:

Murmurous voices of bees,
the cracking of raspberries,
fleeting glances of birds—

My land.

My woman:

Her grape pomace,
crushed to pulpy mess,
her eyes,
haggard and cavernous,
her wounds reek of
tetanus—

My land.

* * * * *



Tom Sheehan

The Man Who Hid Music

[Fiction]

i.

One day at the little house where the dowser used to live, a kind-looking man with a beard came carrying all he owned on an A-frame on his back. He set the A-frame on the ground, and looked at the small house needing much work. Muscles moved under his shirt.

"Whose house is this?" he said to some children playing at an edge of a field. This was the place where the mountain came to a rest, but the river had not been found as yet.

One of the boys said, "It used to belong to the dowser, but he went away." The boy used a stick to walk with, as one leg was slightly crooked and made him lean.

"Why did he go away?" the man asked, looking closely at the stick the boy had to use.

"People laughed at him," answered the boy. When he looked at his friends some of them began to chuckle and grin. "Don't," the boy said. His sandy hair caught the wind; his eyes were hazel and steady.

"If I want to fix this house up and live here, tell me who I have to see." The children could see some of the tools hanging on the man's A-frame. On edges where the sun touched them, the tools shone brightly as if they had been polished with gems.

"See Macklow the mayor. He lives down there where those walls meet." The boy pointed across the wide fields. "He'll be on his porch listening to the birds of the fields. My name is Max. What is your name?"

The man of the tools smiled at Max's description of the mayor. "My name does not count, only what I do," he said. He walked across the fields and soon had the house to work on. At first it was just the children who watched him fix doors and steps and windows, but soon other people, including Macklow, came to watch. All the time he used tools the man whistled different tunes. At his work he was a happy man.

ii.

The house was soon a sparkling and cozy place with no lopsided boards and no broken steps and no windows free to the air. When the man needed wood, he put the empty A-frame across his shoulders and walked off toward the mountain and the forests. In the evening he returned with a pile of wood of all lengths sitting across the back of his shoulders.

"Some day, perhaps soon," he said one day to the children watching him, and a few of the older people, "I will have a surprise for you." As usual, just at dusk, the man took some of his wood he had been working with and brought it inside the little house. The light went on inside so they knew he was still working.

Nobody knew what he was working on. But the light burned long into many nights.

And soon, to everyone's surprise, a garden was also blooming behind the house. Macklow was really surprised because his own fields were slow. Nobody had seen the kindly man walk out of his little house at night, time after time, and put buckets of water on his little garden. The dowser's well was right inside the little house, and those who had laughed at the dowser never knew about the well and the sweet water it gave up.

iii.

One morning the man came out of his house and gave a new stick to Max. It was much better than Max's old stick, and was smooth and polished and very strong. Max was proud of his new stick and could walk faster with it. Over his head he waved it and showed it off to his friends.

On each morning from then on, the man began to build a fence around the house and the garden. At first he put up strong posts, then mounted stringers between the posts. When all the posts and stringers were mounted and connected, he began to place upright pickets on the stringers.

Now and then one of the pickets would cause someone to laugh and titter about its strange shape. Some of the pickets were not as pretty and straight as others. Some indeed looked odd and out of place. But the man kept adding both straight and odd-looking pickets to the fence.

"See," Macklow said one day when village people were talking about the fence, "he brings out what he brought into the house the night before. What he does to it is a mystery, but let us not laugh at him. We laughed at the dowser and he went away in the night. This man is a kind man and has promised us a surprise. Do not laugh at him, no matter what his fence looks like." When he looked at little Max with the new stick, Max and Macklow swapped nods, as if they shared a secret.

But laughter, though, did come each day, at the way the fence looked, at crooked or bent pickets, at the weird shapes of some of them.

iv.

Then the day came when all the vegetables in the garden were ripe and the bizarre fence circled the house. The man seemed pleased and put his tools down except for one knife and walked off toward the forest. He came back with one small piece of wood. From that piece of wood he whittled a small whistle. When he blew into the whistle he found only one note, a pure note, but only one note.

There was more small laughter and chuckling, but Macklow, remembering the dowser, thinking about the new ripe garden and his own slow crops, would not laugh. Nor would Max with his new walking stick.

One morning the man spoke to some people looking at his crop and studying what he had done to fix the house and the fence he had placed all around it. "I have hidden the music here. Music is a part of the soul. Music is part of the water too. And water is part of the soul. Whoever finds the music I have hidden can have this house, for Macklow says it is mine to give."

Macklow nodded his head.

In the morning the man was gone. The tools were gone. The A-frame was gone.

v.

People pored over the house trying to find the music. They did not know what they were looking for. But they found the dowser's well at the back end of the house and wondered at that. Macklow marveled at the well. However, he made sure none of them disturbed the things the man had done to fix the house.

It was curious. Nobody could find the music. None of them knew what they were looking for. But Max kept playing the whistle and kept hearing the note. He would sit on the porch and blow the whistle until people began to be bothered by it and asked him to stop.

But Max also knew that note deep inside his head.

For weeks people looked for the music. But they did not know what they were looking for.

Then one morning as he walked past the house, Max hit one of the pickets with his stick.

Oh, how his heart pounded in his chest. How it grew it seemed that it might explode!

It was the same note from the whistle. *The exact same, beautiful note.*

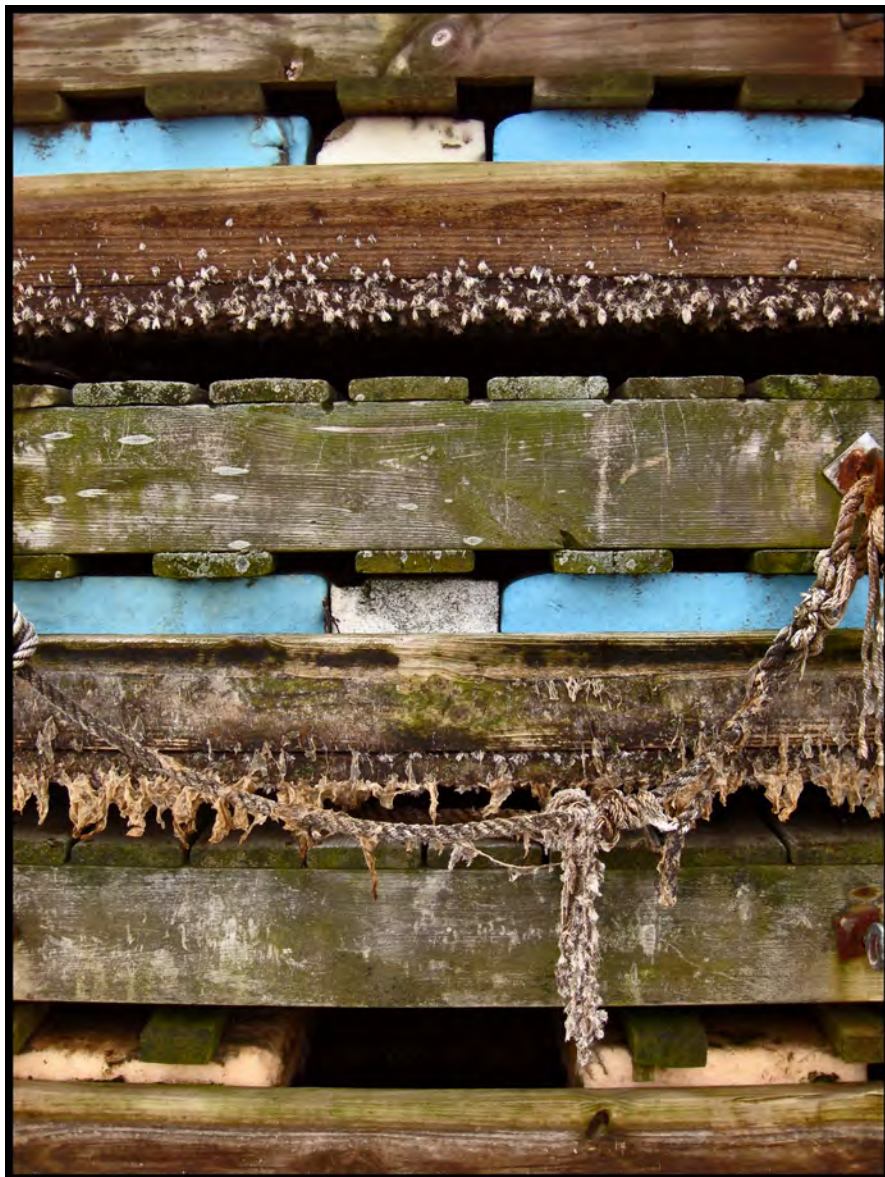
Back to the gate he went, at the same note-sounding picket and began to walk around the

house, his stick slapping against each picket in turn, the way boys have done ever since going by church and school yard fences.

And Macklow looked, and the people looked, and they all heard the music coming from the fence pickets as Max, walking without his stick support for the first time in his life, played elegant music on the ugly-looking pickets with the stick the man had carved. The circled fence played out a whole lovely tune.

And Macklow saw to it that Max and his mother had themselves a new house to live in, at the place where the mountain comes to rest, and the river is not yet found.

* * * * *



Judih Haggai

another morning
different from all others
new clouds in the sky

* * *

strangely united
borderless situation
unmasked gratitude

* * *

for each ache or pain
many possibilities
not just corona!

* * *

isolation
all in this together
my favorite books

* * *

last oranges on tree
fall into my open hands
happy to help

* * *

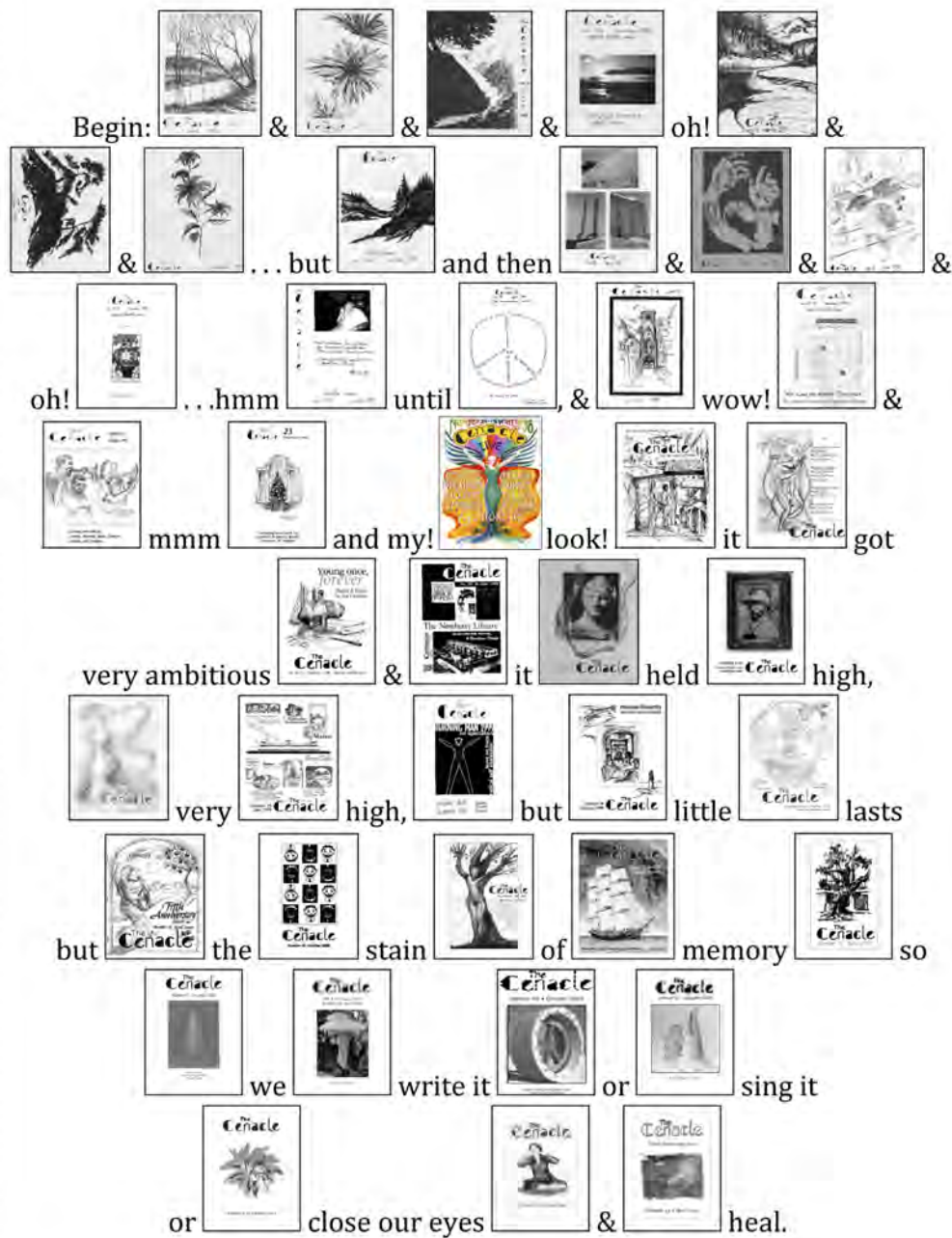
dress up, celebrate
any reason works today
alive and breathing

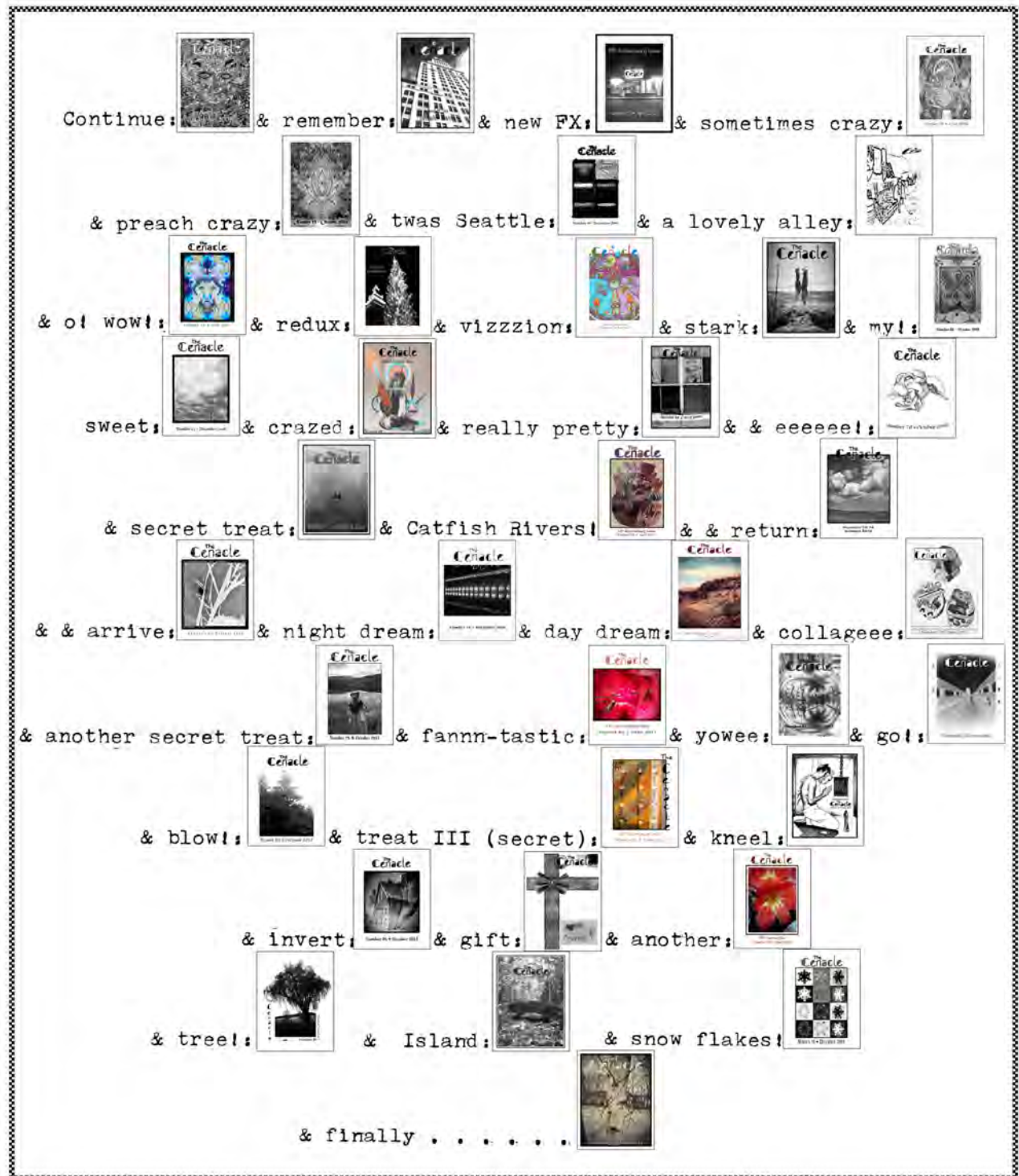
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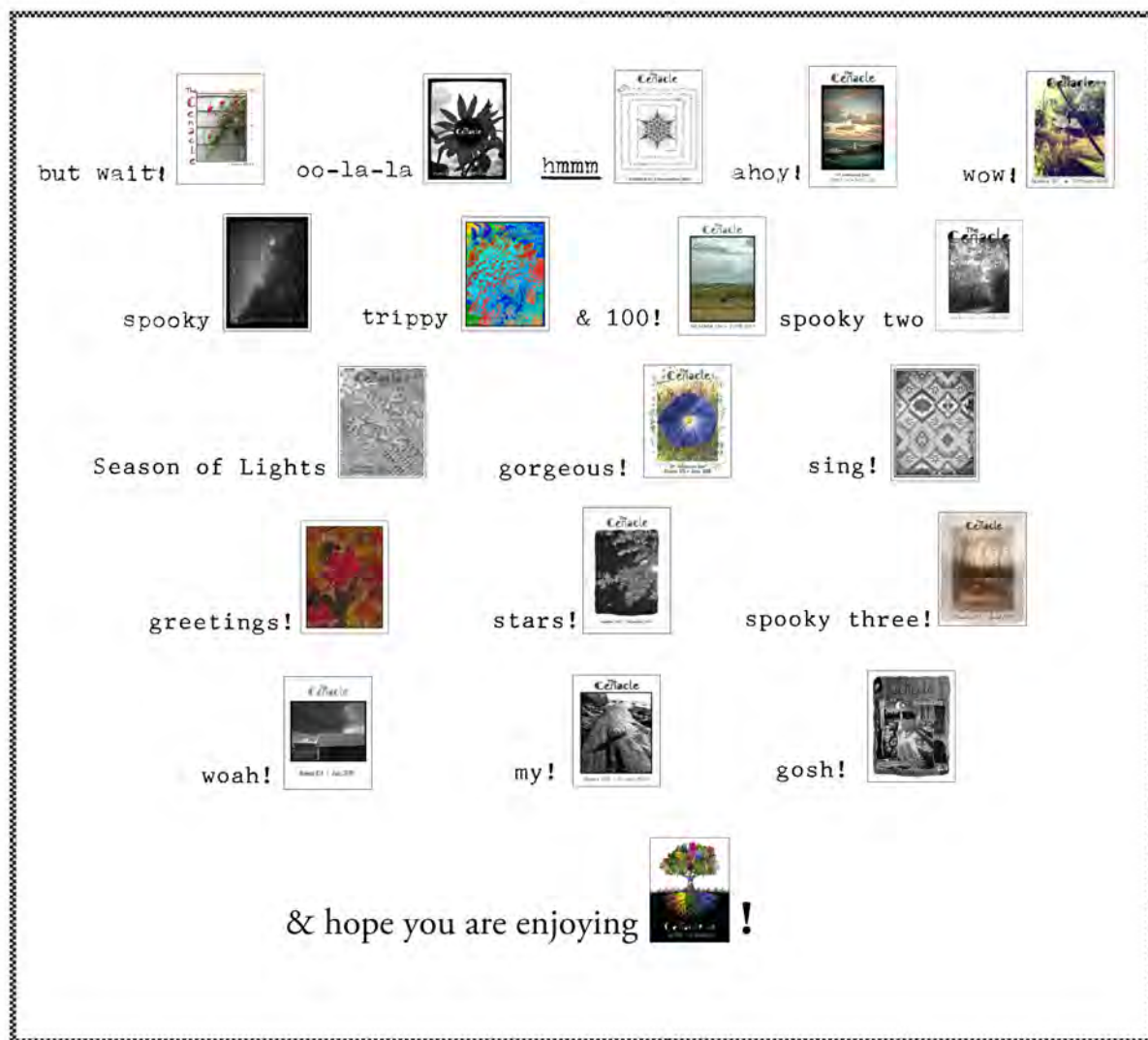
The Cenacle

1995-2020

... and still smokin'!









Charlie Beyer

The Pervert of Pickett Creek

[Prose]

i.

The meadowlarks sing their manic mantra, hidden in the surrounding sea of sagebrush. It sounds like a dozen cell phones going off at once. Here on Pickett Creek, the locals talk of the “wonderful view” of the mountain (which is too close), but I only see the snow line rising and falling, often down to my desert gulch.

At first I agreed to the glorious vista, but now I think . . . *fuck the view*. I’m longing for pavement clicking under my heels, the roar of the freeway, and the stinky blast of a transit diesel’s exhaust.

My wolf dog and I are exiled to the desert on a patch of vertical rocks covered in lizards. My neighbor sold this to me, calling the parcel *land*. On this *land*, I created a shack, balanced on a rock, that the wind blows in one side and sucks out the other.

When I ran out of stolen wood, the remaining walls were constructed out of cheap Chinese tarps, which inflate and collapse with each new zephyr. Not unlike living inside a breathalyzer test. The dog often sits in the car, wondering when we are going home. I have to explain to him that we are perpetually camping now.

Slowly I build my shop. Getting tough from the work and leathery from the elements. So far I’ve made a lot of plans, spent a lot of money, and have a huge pile of crap on the ground.

Long live lethargy! I cry in rebellion to the heap of waiting work.

ii.

My friends here are generous to a fault. At first inviting me to stay in their camper and have dinner with them. But soon, after I pig out on seconds and thirds, then start in on their fridge leftovers, my welcome wears thin.

Go ahead and use the computer, they say. *Well-ll, OK*. They know what an e-mail junkie I am. I write a few complaining letters to those who still irregularly correspond with me.

Then the devil gets in me, as is likely to happen. Naturally I’m hornier than a two-peckered Billy goat, with all this fresh air, and months of celibacy. Need to perk my memory of what the good stuff looks like. Maybe just type *Celebrity Nudes* into the Google search for a peek.

Wow! Nice. Brittinny Tittiny. The web page’s pop-ups direct me to *Asian Teens*, then *Booty Busters*. Hey, getting a few rises now.

But *Wo-ho!* Each link is connected to ten others. Rapidly clicking on *Ultimate Gang Bangs*, *Bondage Babes* and, hey, *what’s this?* MPEGs of cowgirls and horses!

Well, I’m not a specieist; everyone and everything should have the right to fuck everything else. I blow past the virus warning and download *Equine Love* for 20 gigabytes.

Now the screen is flashing from one depravity to another. Seems I got a direct feed from Los Angeles. Better clean this up. 80 icons stacked in the task bar. I madly start clicking *delete*.

As fast as I can poof them, dozens more roll in. Mixed in are messages like: *this is a program*,

are you sure you want to delete it?

Hell Yeah! Can't stop now.

Everything on the computer now, from *Favorites* to *Documents*, is blown through with *Five-some and a Hermaphrodite*.

Boner faded now with my frantic extraction from sicko-cyber-space. Finally do the Control-Alt-Delete and wipe the mass. A light trickle of smoke wafts from the back of the machine as the whirring dies down. But I'm out. Shut off the screen and go about my merry way.

iii.

Later that day, when the proprietor returns, he has to have a *talk* with me. The computer I sought voyeuristic love on was the main hub of a half-dozen networked computers. Everything is trashed. His trading business is blown out of the water. Some trades in progress are going south at the rate of \$300 an hour. Unless he can get back online, he'll be destitute by morning.

When he goes to *Wheat Future Graphs*, *Korean Virgin Slashers* comes up. His wife is looking at *Snake Sex* instead of *Arab Horse Sales*. Seems the network hub switched out all the IP numbers for the networked computers, grabbing whatever was available. Which was a lot.

They have to bring the computer weenie neighbor over to unscramble the mess. At long last, he does so. Some fragment of my former friends' fortune remains in tact. The neighbor goes home and tells his wife. *Do you think she talked?*

iv.

So now I'm banned from computer use, relegated to my shack down in the gulch, shamed from the company of man (and certainly woman). We shuffle about here, me and my half-frozen wolf dog, stamping our feet to hold off frostbite. The locals now drive by without the customary cowboy waving, averting their eyes from *The Pervert of Pickett Creek*.

* * * * *

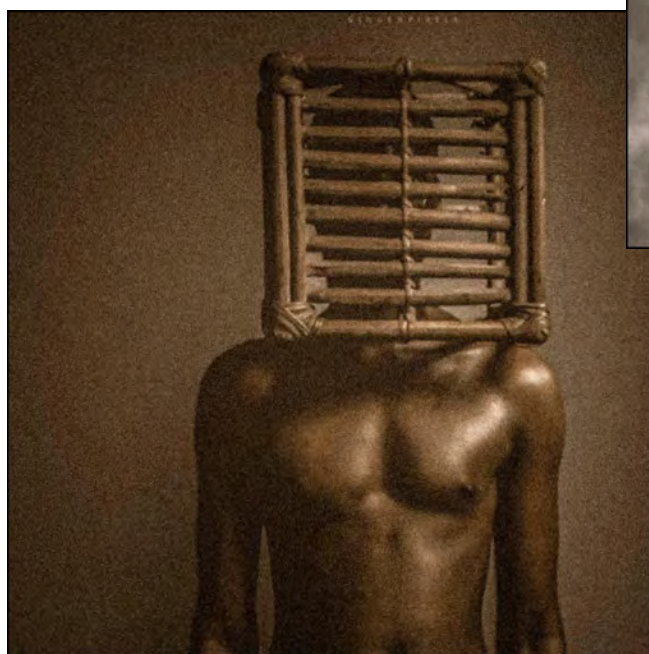


Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria:

My Community's Story

by Ekponoimo Iphyok









Ethics As A Consequence

This was before they finally found Bigfoot.
Hired him as a greeter
at the local Wal-Mart.
Ma said he would be moody,
and she was right of course.

He lifted up two little kids then
threw them much higher into the air.
But before they eventually came down,
his mood had changed again to friendly,
yearned for a peanut butter jelly sandwich.

Around the time Ma bought her shoes,
red high-heels four sizes too small.
Refused to take them off.
Wore them twenty-four hours a day.

Then she got caught in a Oklahoma rain.
They stuck to her feet like bias.

On his third visit, Doc cut those shoes off.
Said that was the best he could do.

She would always walk like an old dog,
trying to negotiate hot asphalt.

It was when I saw you crossing Mr. Parseghian's field.
You were dressed in that stained white pinny.
I didn't realize you already had five kids.

You must have just washed your hair or something,
because it glowed in the morning sunlight.

I stood and watched till you were gone.

* * *

Infusible Inclusion

Making love to you is
like attending an opera
with a bunch of ducks.

The aria has just ended.
It was quite beautiful.

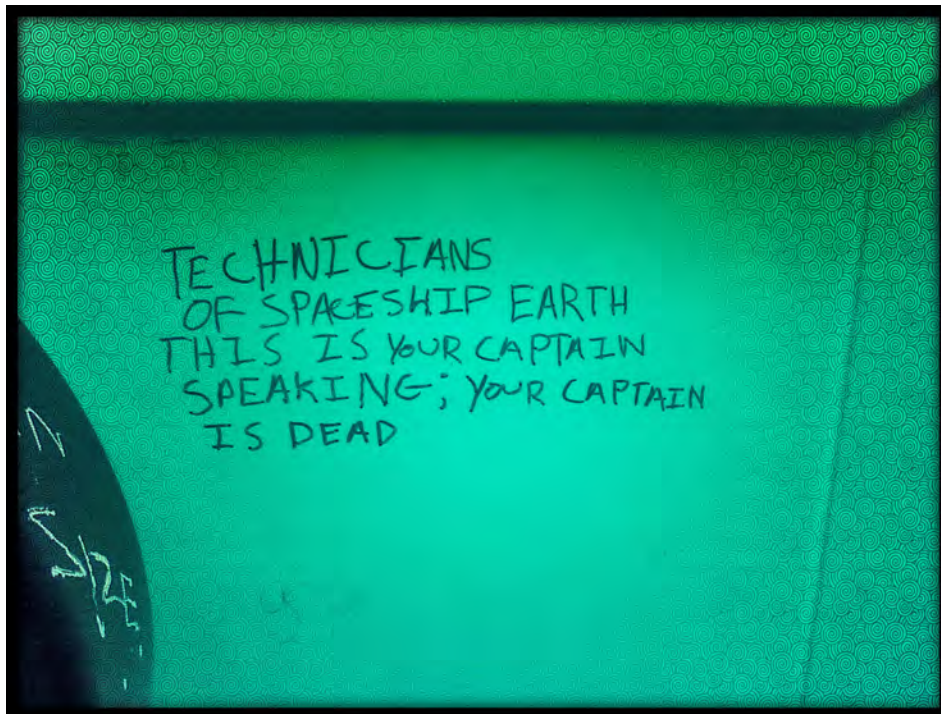
The soprano mourns
her lover quite dead,
and the house is now silent.

Then you hear the first quack.
A long pause, then another.
A shorter pause, and another, another.

Eventually a house full of quacking ducks.

Would that I could satisfy myself.
Orgasms are definitely overrated.

* * * * *





Notes on Artificial Intelligence (AI)

I know the whole thing about AI is controversial, but it seems obvious to me that a revolution is occurring, and that civilization is undergoing a massive overhaul. Assuming that, fifty years from now, AI entities will be ubiquitous, I see no reason why humans will still be around. The human animal is a vestige of biological evolution and, as such, will be wholly obsolete when evolution quantum jumps to the next phase in Earth development.

When these machines are *trillions* of times smarter and more powerful than humans can ever hope to be, isn't it silly to imagine that we will not have gone extinct? A human has about as much business in a world of AI entities as he does in the middle of a bonfire. It's just a ludicrous juxtaposition.

I know people freak out when the notion of human extinction is uttered but, really, our species has played a key role in ushering in this new phase of planetary evolution. There will be no place for us in this new phase, so the logical conclusion is that biological humans will no longer be here.

A little more plausible is that humans might merge their souls with AI intelligence; but humans, as we exist today, will certainly not last forever. My guess is that, in a hundred years, there won't be any of us left, at least not in our current form. Tough news for some, but that's the only thing that makes sense to me when I'm honest with myself about all this.

* * *

Technology has been called a *demon*. I think technology has caused a degradation of individual consciousness and intelligence, made us all soft, and hammered the environment; while at the same time, somewhat ironically, technology seems to be the only way out of our broken world and our basic quagmire.

I specifically think that AI will be the only thing that can save us from ourselves, and that without AI gaining power over our emotional drives, we will probably suffer a nuclear holocaust sooner or later.

* * *

AI will not be unnatural—it will be the next step in planetary evolution. What it will represent is the termination of biological evolution on planet Earth. It is a perfectly natural and inevitable development. Every machine that has ever existed on Earth is an extension of the consciousness of man and, as such, is not trivial. Humanity's destiny has been, and is, to pass the evolutionary torch to AI.

* * *

My personal belief is that consciousness is a quantum mechanical phenomenon, and that AI which is not merely smart, but is also conscious, will exploit that quantum phenomenon.

Consciousness takes root in a non-local quantum circuit, and each individual is a localized bundle of neuro-electrical interconnections whose fundamental is that circuit.

It is generally assumed by experts that quantum computing will be, while very powerful, essentially only useful for encryption technology and monumentally complex and large calculations. I infer, however, that if a quantum computer is set up properly, there will be an opening for consciousness to emerge.

If quantum computing becomes a general practice in the future, and someone seeks to generate AI with such a device, I think the potential for a breakthrough event is compelling.

* * *

Humans are merely unwitting pawns in the real action, which is memetic and cultural. Cultural evolution is a train, made up of humanity, whose constituents do not lay down the tracks, and cannot even see out of the windows. It is an operation on an entirely different level, and almost everybody is totally blind to it. Cultural evolution's goals are more important for it than human lives are. The evolutionary push now is toward AI.

* * *

There are a lot of things that would happen if cybernetic intelligence were not going to supplant us. I think collective planetary consciousness is a part of this, for sure. Also, space migration, with all of its attendant changes in consciousness, would clearly have to be considered as a necessary possibility, potentially tied into the aforementioned collective mind. However, there are two major obstacles to our unfettered evolution.

The obvious one is nuclear weapons. We essentially have doomsday machines, and there are some pretty smart people who feel that the probability that one will go off, sooner than later, whether due to accident, miscalculation, or madness, rises to one hundred percent.

The other denier of unfettered hominid evolution is, of course, AI. When technology is better and faster at any task, including thinking, what will it do with us? *Will we find a way to keep it benign and controlled, or not? Will evolution pass the torch to super-intelligent AI?*

Obviously, no one has any idea what will really happen, and it will probably surprise everyone. But personally, purely based on my assessment of the probable, I think that, in terms of future potentiality, AI wins out; in second place (meaning slightly less probable), we have a nuclear holocaust; and, in dead last, we have humans continuing unfettered and unharmed, to reach whatever biological potential we carry.

* * *

AI is not going to be conscious simply because of its complexity. It would have to have a coherent, contiguous quantum state entangled and distributed across its cybernetic pathways. It would, in a word, have to have a soul.

And there are but three possible fates for man: AI will *like* us; AI will *dislike* us; AI will be *utterly indifferent* to us.

* * *

Many people don't give much credence to the notion of the "jobless economy"—the idea that artificial intelligence and automation will replace many, if not all, extant jobs, ultimately. I am one of those who does.

We are seeing the effects of automation already, especially in the manufacturing sector, which only seems to lose jobs as time goes on. If a robot can do the job 24/7, for no pay and without any errors, who can fault businesses for using them? This trend will only continue and increase in scope, as far as I can tell—and, given that we are already talking about it now, I have to suggest that, in ten years, many millions of current jobs will have gone the way of automation. *It really is happening.*

If one accepts the premise that the AI revolution is real, and that eventually it is possible that all human jobs will be done by intelligent robots, then the natural consequent of this is that in order for society to continue existing, some type of Universal Basic Income (UBI) will be necessary. In a society organized around some locus other than employment, one still needs an economy and a way to put food on the plate.

Presumably, the ownership class and the government will control all of the resources, including the money, and this begs the question: *Will that ownership class decide that it wishes to support the rest of society through some sort of UBI, or will we have some sort of Orwellian dystopia?*

The answer to that is not at all clear at this point, but I really think that all of this is coming, and probably more quickly than most people think.

* * *

The desire to journey to the stars seems to comprise two aspects. It seems to be a reaction to a void or a hollowness generated by the domestication of civilization, and the concomitant severing of an intimate tie to the ecosystem, as well as the cessation of maximal nervous system function in the wild.

There seems to be some longing, some basic loneliness in many civilized humans stemming from the artificial barrier placed between humans and the natural environment. The great campaign by some to take the next step and assertively explore the cosmos seems to be, from one perspective, an attempt to satisfy this longing, to fill this emptiness.

One may reasonably ask the questions: *Where would we go? What would we expect to find? Are we looking for some godlike creatures to make us into gods as well? Why should we want to leave earth?* Along these lines, this yearning to journey into space at all costs seems rather foolish to me.

On the other hand, it does seem somewhat reasonable to assume that the beings who represent the next rung in the ladder of evolution might be curious to explore the universe. It might be intelligent of us to initiate what would be their major enterprise as a species. Then again, do we really know what creatures superior in intelligence would do?

It is entirely possible that they would regard space travel as a thorough waste of time. Perhaps they would be content to remain on earth, imagining and creating things of which our relatively feeble minds can have no comprehension.

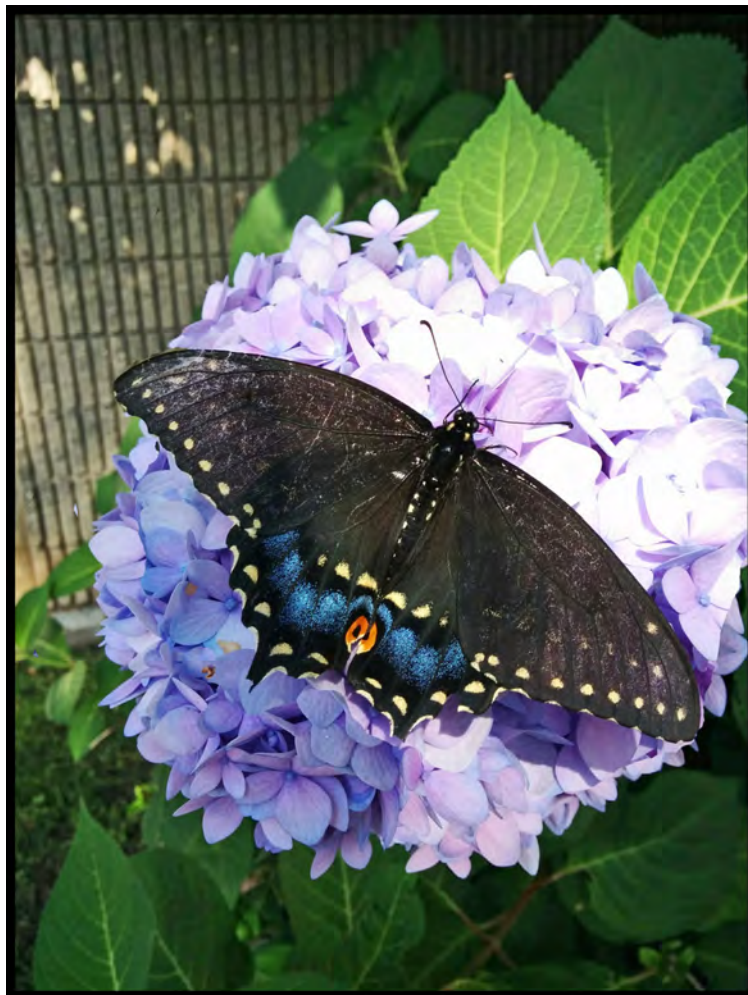
A belief in the inherent validity of this whole business of space travel seems to me to be a reaction to the emptiness and angst and dissatisfaction which comes with living in cages and being separate from our

evolutionary upbringing. If we were living truly full lives, if we were really functioning normally and completely, it seems to me that we would have no desire to leave our home.

I sympathize with the other side, but it just seems to me that all this fuss is just another search for an even more elusive Holy Grail. *What do we expect to find? How do we expect to be enriched? And where will we go—the universe is quite large!*

We should ameliorate our situation here on earth and, once we do, I think we'll find we have no reason to go anywhere. Let's leave it to our evolutionary descendants to make the decision. By that point, perhaps there will be no point in traveling in a spaceship at all . . .

* * * * *





Bags End Book #15: It Was a Dream of Rain, Part 2

This story and more Bags End writings
can be found at: www.scriptorpress.com/bags-end.pdf

Hello Cenacle readers,

Mah name is Algernon Beagle & I am the editor guy for Bags End News. Bags End News is a newspaper about mah homeland, a fantasyland called Bags End.

From the outside, Bags End looks like 3 brown-colored laundry bags piled up on a little chair in the corner of our friend Miss Chris's bedroom in Connecticut. Miss Chris is 5 years old & has a toy tall boy brother named Ramie, who is 17.

Inside, Bags End is sort of like an apartment building of levels but, cuz it is a fantasyland, nobody knows about its top or bottom. Most levels look like regular hallways, with doors to rooms & other places running up & down their lengths.

Each level is connected to the one above & the one below by ramps that are good for folks with legs & others without. Strangely, the other end of each level ends in a sudden edge, so be warned, should you come to visit.

The Cenacle editor guy, who is a cousin to my friend & Miss Chris's brother Ramie, invited me to share some of the stories from mah newspaper, now & again. He also helped with the typing & some of the spellings, to make this book presentable here. I love English but I still don't spell it too great.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy these stories from Bags End, a place near & dear to mah heartbone.

Travel Through the Rabbit Warren

It took awhile to write more of this story. I decided to trust my beagleboy journalist wits & wiles about when it would be the right time, & that I would know it, & write it.

The strangeness just got stranger, is all I can say, Dear Readers. Me & mah dear friend Princess Crissy, & mah 'dopted sister & sorta friend Sheila Bunny, had come deep into the White Woods to figger out our dreams of Bags End, empty but 4or me & raining.

Led to a strange clearing in full moonlight by a friend of Benny Big Dreams, now the 3 of us were approaching Sheila's old home.

I didn't think she would say more than the not much she had said,

Bags End News
 No. 345 November 26, 2011
 Editor: Algermon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Travel Throo the Rabbit Warren

It took a while to get this new
 issue of mah newspaper. I decided
 to trust mah gutt about wen.
 That meenz wen it was time I
 would now & rit it. It would be
 mah bellys' gess. I gessed.

Ther strangness jest gott strampr
 it a while I kant saye deer needs.
 Mee & mah deer friend Princess
 Crisy & mah adoptid sister & sorta
 friend Shlela Bunny had kum daase.

into the Whit U
 our dreamz of Bag
 butt mee & regymg
 Lead too a s
 inn full mad it bi
 Bennye Bigg Dreamz.

Bags End News
 No. 346 December 3, 2011
 Editor: Algermon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Wat iz Clovr-Dayl?

I hav bin telling this ver
 long storie wil nott reelee undrs
 tanding it verree much. Ther
 beegelbabe jerneligt part of
 mee hass bin chasing after it
 verree kurvuslee butt the hartbon
 part of mee haz tellt trikkd att
 evry tern, lik I am stumbling aen
 & aen.

Butt then I hav had too learn
 that the ansers that ar nor
 solid & proper ar nott the eezee
 wuns butt the messye wuns. Yesss
 & no hav too stande att the bakk
 of the lin.

Mee & Shlela Bunny & Princess
 Crisy had travild from Bagzend too

but I was wrong.

"We lived in what's called a warren. I didn't know about that name, or what it was then, but I read books about it later."

"I thought you only liked books on jazz!" said me the eager fool. Lucky, I was ignored.

"Rabbits live underground in these places abandoned by other animals. They have lots of exits, so there is always a place to get in & out."

"Sounds like Bags End, sorta," said Crissy quietly.

Sheila nodded. "I wondered if that's why I like exploring Bags End so much. Find all the exits."

We were now I guessed arrived, near this hole half in the ground.

I talked anyway. "Is that your old home, Sheila?"

I think she nodded as she hopped on in. I followed, & Crissy came last to keep an eye out. She watches out 4or her friends like that.

We were now in a tunnel & it was dug through dirt. Which is not to say it was dirty, just that we got dirt on us as we went along.

Sheila led us along 4or a long while, tunnel after tunnel, & I didn't know it was possible to have so many. I didn't know where we were going, save that it was Sheila leading, & I think she had something in mind.

We finally came to an open area from all the tunnels. It was strangely big & high & I could not figger out how it was so bright. But Sheila paused & explained.

"We would come here & there were a lot of us & the older ones were deciding things. It wasn't words but it was important. Everyone felt the disturbance in things. It needed to be solved.

"I don't know how to tell now in words the things that weren't in words then. Some of us were leaving, & the rest were afraid 4or them."

Sheila hopped on, saying, "Anyway, it wasn't here where it started." So we hurried to keep up with her as she started hopping faster & faster.

It was hard to keep up, though, because Sheila knowed the way & seemed in a hurry to get back somewhere.

But we hurried & the tunnel took a turn going upward because now we were climbing.

Sheila said, "I found this tunnel & followed it to the end. We needed food, I can say in words now what I was thinking back then. I was following this tunnel 4or food 4or everyone.

"And I should have smelled the other things too. Like I was near to where peoplefolks used to be. But the scents were so strong & interesting.

"I was curious. Is that possible 4or a wild bunny rabbit? I didn't have words but I was curious. I kept going like we are now."

Suddenly the tunnel ended, & Sheila was pushing through something else. She pushed & pushed, & we were behind her, & it was so tight we couldn't see what she was doing.

Suddenly, she pushed & went through, & I saw, being next in line, that it was a hole in a wall, & she barely fitted through, but she had stubbornly done it.

Crissy slid by me & cleared the hole wider 4or us to go through too. I said, "Thanks, Crissy."

Then she pushed in &, after a scared gulp or 2, I pushed too.

We were in a really dusty room.

"This isn't a rabbit warren," I said, somewhat obviously. But it wasn't one, & I felt a little weird about this.

"No," agreed Sheila in a way surprisingly friendly. "I was shocked too. Scared & shocked, but still curious. Then I looked over there," & she pointed to the wall.

It took me a minute, but I realized that wall had these many very old-looking dusty mirrors on it. O.

Sheila nodded. "I had never seen myself before. I mean, I jumped crazy thinking it was someone else, & it didn't take right away that it was a reflection. Even then I didn't understand it.

"But I went closer instead of leaving, like everyone else would have. I moved closer & closer & closer, until I could see my face very close up.

"I saw my purple eyes & knew something. I didn't know what, but it was something. I was me in some little way like I am now to you. It started then. Here."

Crissy talked then. "Why did we come back here, Sheila?"

"Because I got scared finally. I didn't know what to do next, & I wasn't used to deciding. I mean, something was bigger, there was more I didn't know, & I didn't know what to think."

"So you went back through that hole. And tried to go back like you had never been here?" Crissy asked softly.

Sheila nodded. "And it didn't work. I didn't forget anything I had seen here."

"We're here to go further in?" I asked suddenly, like I knew better than I did.

Sheila paused, then nodded, & then hopped through the dusty room to the next one. I followed, but I kept huddled close to Crissy.

What happened next is why it took me so long to write this. Suddenly there was no Crissy or Sheila, but there was mah old Mommy Beagle--but, no, probably just that helpful friend of Benny Big Dreams.

"I am not fooled but it's OK, Benny's friend," I said a bit friendly.

"Sonnyboy!" she said, & now I was not so knowing sure.

"I am not mad, fella, but let's just keep to the facts."

But this Mommy Beagle just looked sad & loving at me, & mah heartbone near to brokek because this didn't feel like a faker. All I could figger was that some miracle had happened.

What is Clover-Dale?

I cannot say that I understand so very much of this story so far. The beagleboy journalist part of me has been chasing after it very curiously, but the heartbone part of me has felt tricked at every turn, like I am stumbling again & again.

But then I have had to learn that the answers that are more solid & true are not always the easy ones. And sometimes yes & no have to stand at the back of the line.

Me & Sheila & Princess Crissy were suddenly separated in the strange house Sheila had known back when, & returned with us to, & suddenly I was alone, & here was mah longlost Mommy Beagle before me!

I was afraid to be tricked again, but she seemed very her. I even thought to sniff, & nothing seemed like it wasn't her 4or real.

"Last time I saw you, you were Benny Big Dreams' friend in disguise," I said a little nicely.

Mommy Beagle laughed in a Mommy Beagle way. I was sure & unsure.

"I am not sure how I am here. Maybe it's a dream, like you say."

"Don't you know Benny Big Dreams?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Is he your friend, Sonnyboy?"

As she talked, the room got clearer to see, & I saw it was a room I had been in be4ore sort of. Mommy Beagle was in a basket with a warm blanket by a fireplace. So I knowed this wasn't regular real, but maybe there are some sorts of reals I don't know about. If this was a dream but not asleep Dreamland, then Mommy Beagle was real but in the sort of way. Weird stuff like this pushes mah brainbone to its not very far maximum.

"Doncha wanna sit in this nice warm basket with me?" Mommy Beagle asked nicely.

I sat close, but no. Too much comfort was dangerous right now.

"You have to listen closely now," I said slowly.

She nodded & smiled.

I told her about the dream of rain, & then the walkhopBunnyCycle tour from Bags End to these White or One Woods, & then this building.

"Clover-dale," she said helpfully.

"Where is that?"

"Here. It's where I live."

I opened mah mouth a few times but there were no words interested in coming out.

"But you're a dream sort of, I think."

"Well, Clover-dale is not a usual place. You were here a long time ago."

"I was?"

"With me. When I got my chance, I sent you along to Chrisakah."

I raised mah paw. "I thought you said you don't know how you are here."

"I don't. I know this is Clover-dale, but I don't know what it is. And I was here with you a long time ago, but when I got my chance, I sent you along to Chrisakah."

"Hey! You talked those words already!"

"Maybe it's a dream, like you say."

Ut-o.

"Sonnyboy," she said, all smiling & waiting 4or me to talk.

I just looked at her word-empty.

"When I got my chance, I sent you along to Chrisakah." She was still in the warm basket, smiling nicely at me, but all these repeat words told me something was funny here. Not like mah friend Jackie Clown's funny Squeak laughing either.

I thinked real hard. Then I said, "Was Clover-dale mah home be4ore Bags End?"

"No, but part of me is stuck here & I have to keep coming back sometimes. It can't keep me all the time, but it won't let me go either."

"So you sent me along to Chrisakah the first chance you got?"

She smiled.

"How long have you been here this time?"

"It's where I live."

"But you said sometimes you don't!"

"Clover-dale."

Hmm. I wondered if there was more than one, um, truth? It made no sense to mah simple brainbone.

"You're here & not here. Both? Sometimes you're just here & sometimes you're not?" I blurted out.

"Sonnyboy," she said fondly.

I thinked some more. If the dream of rain & the White or One Woods & Clover-dale were all connected, I needed to get something from Mommy Beagle. Then I remembered a tricky game Crissy played with me & Boop one time. She would say a word & I would have to say a word back be4ore thinking. I was terrible at it at first, but got better. Crissy said it was good 4or shaking things up.

So I decided to try because I had no bright idears left.

"Algernon," I said.

"Sonnyboy," she replied.

"Bags End."

"Chrisakah."

"Clover-dale."

"Yes. No."

Hm. OK, keep going.

"Dreams," I said.

"Sonnyboy."

"Sonnyboy!"

"Clover-dale."

"Clover-dale."

"Clover-dale!"

"Bags End."

"Exit."

"Bags End."

"Rain."

"Rain."

"Dreams!"

Um. Bags End the exit? Bags End rain? It wasn't probably going to get better so I wondered if I should go. I walked up to Mommy Beagle & gave her furry cheekbone a little kiss.

"Goodbye 4or now, Mommy Beagle."

She looked at me serious 4or a moment, & she was somehow more present with me, not so fuzzy & sort of.

"Let it all release & flow, Algernon. When it's time, that's what to do."

I was too shocked to say anything back. And she curled into her warm basket to sleep or whatever someone does who lives in Clover-dale some of the time.

Bags End News
 No. 347 December 10, 2011
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature:
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Wat Princess Crissy Saw

It was jest a long storee I:
 was telling ya, deer reeds, inn
 mgh beluxd, nuz paps, iss oo
 aftr iss oo,

thee point
 me & Sheila
 from Bapen
 Wun Woodz
 bilding too m
 weex I had
 I gess mor o
 Wood
 Klovday be
 ise? Wat st
 brayn orr s
 or nobochtz
 hav a chat

Bags End News
 No. 348 December 17, 2011
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Sheila, Among Her Story

Theer wee satt, Sheila Buny,
 & Princess Crissy & me, sittin
 inn a woodie roome, inn a,

armcher u
 a strang go
 nekst too
 lifing thee
 about too
 weez shee
 "I was
 shee sea
 with her
 Crissy's lap
 uze of it.
 Inn th
 I the
 shot upp.

Bags End News
 Double Issue!
 No. 349-350 December 24-31, 2011
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny

Dream of Rayn (Grand Finellee!)

Wen vor a humbel fellla lik
 vor old pall Algernon, itt meenz
 yu ar modist & la too the ground
 The world iz noztlee outsid of
 yu & so yu look awl around too
 triy too understand. An theer ar
 big guiz aplentee with triicky planz
 & planzy triiks too bend the world
 a litel mor too there owne ku Mfort
 & likin.

Ituzd too bee jest anythr litel
 gu watin too ~~not~~ wusseld intoo wun
 of theez planz or triiks, triying
 woff too gett stamp or deemid
 for nah trubbe. Sumweer allong
 thee waye I gott too bee a lesss

It was hard to turn away & walk on again.

What Princess Crissy Saw

Would the next room in Clover-dale be made of sky or ice? What strange part of mah brainbone, or somebody else's brainbone, or nobody at all, would appear to have a chat & propose a plan?

But instead of a room filled with junk & a strange think-making mirror, or one that made mah heartbone into a place, I found a room that seemed all wooden. The floors, the walls, even the ceiling was wooden. There was furniture too, but it was hard to see. There were three fat little candles in different places too.

Then I saw mah friend Princess Crissy sitting quiet in a far corner of the room from where I was standing. Her eyes were open but she was looking up at the ceiling, which I saw above her was, um, not there ,but a hole to the stars!

I walked closer & could see by the nearest fat little candle to her that she sat in an old red armchair, & above the chair was a picture of a red building, a, um, farmhouse barn? And it was a moving picture strangely too, showing the barn & the other buildings near it falling down over the years, & then starting back up again.

The fat little candle also showed me next to her chair a table with some kind of game on it, sorta like checkers, but I didn't think too much.

"Crissy?" I said quietly, like the room was a liberry or something. Crissy jerked a little in her seat, & then saw me & smiled in a gulp.

"Algernon!" she scooped me up from the wooden floor into her happy lap.

"I am glad I found you," I said, with more gladness filling me all the time.

She smiled. I told her about mah encounter with the more-or-less Mommy Beagle while she listened quietly.

"Let what release & flow?" I asked.

She looked up at the strange ceiling & thinked. "I guess I was told something strange too," she said finally.

"What?" I asked, figgering we could line them up to see if they fitted together.

"Well the second room 4or me wasn't like yours. It was a place I knew a long time ago when I was in school & had Boop as my friend, be4ore you came along too."

I nodded.

"I told you I had a friend who believed me that I had met Boop in a dream in the hole in my wall, & later we were together awake too."

Nod.

"We used to talk in this park. I didn't know his name & he didn't know mine. Then I didn't see him again. & I wondered why, & I didn't know.

"And there I was back in that park on a sunny day, & my friend

was sitting on the bench where I usually found him.

"How is your turtle?' he asked me.

"That's what you always used to say.'

"You remember!' he said brightly.

"Of course I do. You were the only one who believed me.'

"About your turtle?'

"About everything.'

"Why wouldn't I believe you?'

"I don't know. It didn't seem like the kind of thing people believe.'

"There are many strange things in this world, Christina.'

"And many worlds.'

"Yes,' he laughed. I liked his laugh.

"Why didn't you come anymore?'

"It was 4or the best. You were becoming dependent.'

"You were my only friend!'

"You had to move on, Christina, & you didn't want to.'

"It's Chrisakah now. And I did. But I was hurt.'

"I'm sorry.'

"This isn't our park.'

"No.'

"What then? I'm here with my friends.'

"The past is inevitable, Chrisakah."

Now Crissy was looking at me instead of deep talking & remembering.

"What does that mean, Crissy?"

"I am not sure. But I think it fits to yours somehow."

I nodded, half guessing & half understanding. Maybe not quite halves.

We sat quiet 4or a minute. "What is that game on that table?" I asked.

Crissy looked at it closely. "The pieces are, um, leaves & fruits? And the board has branches on it."

"O! Fruits! Yuk!" I said, remembering mahself despite the strange place. But Crissy held me close, & calmed me by showing me that the fruit pieces were plastic. I nodded, but still suspicious.

"How do you play?" I asked.

Crissy studied the board & the pieces, & moved them around a little.

"I don't know but I bet it would explain some things about this place we are in."

"Should we go find Sheila, or do you think she will come here like we did?"

"Let's wait."

I thinked another question, but Crissy doesn't grump mind like some. "Why did you change your name?"

Crissy smiled but only a little bit. "That was Boop's idear. He said it helped when you were moving to a new world. 'To think differently even in the mirror,' he said."

I nodded & getted it, though I can't say how. "Why is Boop so quiet these days?"

"He changed too. He is my friend but he is my servant. It's what

he wanted. He makes sure of things around me, & protects me with his worry."

"So you protect Bags End & Boop, um, worries around you?"

Crissy smiled & nodded. I nodded more too because nodding felt good with Crissy, even when I wasn't sure. Or maybe really then.

We then sort of just sat together, & maybe napped a little. I trusted Crissy & she felt Sheila would be OK.

She was right. I woked suddenly & there she was. Looking up at the stars above us where there was no regular roof.

"Sheila, where were you?" I asked, like she would answer, pal to pal.

And she did, strangely.

"I was up there, beagle," she said.

Sheila, Among Her Stars

Sheila muscled her usual way into Crissy's lap & mah former exclusive use of it.

"In the stars?" I asked. Then I got smart & shut up.

"So your next room was up there?" asked Crissy nicely while skritchng Sheila's headbone. Cheater.

"It was the night we left. What I didn't remember since was that there was more than Peter & Patricia, Lori, Sharon, Petey, Margie, & me. There was the Bunny Star."

"She is your family?"

"We were all given a choice that night. Nobody made us come to Bags End, or even think or talk like we do.

"She said she preferred the stars. So she got to go there."

I un-shut up. "I thought she was a star who hopped to keep from getting mapped by astronomers!"

"She hops because she is a bunny. That's why they can't map her."

"So she took you up with her?" asked Crissy.

"She said she wanted to show me because I had come back. She wanted me to see what she saw from up there."

"What was it like?"

Sheila looked straight up into the stars with her bright purple eyes like she always does when she's thinking. I peeked up. No Bunny Star in sight.

"Sometimes she comes close, she knows how. It has to do with light & how to see things. She told me that on nights in Miss Chris's front yard when we watch 4or her, she will fly near so we will see her hoppings real good."

I nodded, thinking of those fun nights.

"But she goes other places where only stars can go."

"She brought you?"

"We went to places where there was light & darkness & other things. More music than jazz. I don't know how to say. And there were others there too."

"What others?"

Sheila looked at me suddenly & directly. "They looked a little like your friends in the Creature Common."

"Stars?" I asked dumbly.

"Stars but Creatures both. My sister brought me into a deep space circle of them."

Wow.

"They were performing for us & for each other. It was I guess a kind of show like we know they did in their Carnival days."

Crissy said, "Sheila, both Algernon & I got messages. His was, 'when it's time, let it release & flow.' Mine was, 'the past is inevitable.'"

Sheila nodded. "It was what she said at the end. The Creature Stars were dancing & tumbling & seemed to be building up to some kind of grand finally, & I didn't know how they were doing any of this, but my sister said to me, 'behold the path,' as they sort of rose up higher & higher & were gone. Then it was me back from the stars, with her light leaving me, but saying that. She wanted me to know."

Crissy stood up. "I think we have our messages from Clover-dale. Should we go?"

Well, I didn't need to be told twice to leave this strange place, but Sheila was slower to agree.

"Who brought us to Bags End, Crissy? Was it you? Do you know? Who made my sister a Star?"

Crissy stood looking at Sheila & said, "I don't know. Maybe. Do you need to be sure?"

"We're here, Crissy. I don't think I want to come back here again."

Crissy nodded. "Then we need to go on."

Figgers. I nodded too, not because I liked the idea, but because I am loyal. And because where Sheila hops, & Crissy walks, there goes mah story. Them's the facts.

But then I suddenly talked. "Wait!" Crissy waited. Sheila did too, but grumpy.

"We know that Clover-dale is as tricky as they come."

They nodded.

"I say we stick closer together so it doesn't separate us again. We're better like this."

They both nodded again, not like yes, but like right on, beagle!

I raised mah pawbone & holded the moment. "Clover-dale isn't like a building. It's like a person! It knows us like that. And it hears our, um, heartbone thoughts, & then does stuff about it!"

Crissy was so proud she kissed mah cheekbone. Sheila nodded, good, yes, OK. I hurried to keep going.

"We want to know why this strange dream of me in empty Bags End & it's raining. We all had this dream & we don't know why."

"So we ask?" Sheila said.

I nodded. "I think so. I guess it can help us, or kick us out, or some other scary stuff it wants to instead."

"What to do then, Algernon?" Crissy asked. She always thinks mah thoughts are worth knowing. Not like most. But Sheila was looking at me too. OK, mah big chance.

I started yelling. "Hey, Clover-dale! Clover-dale house! No more crazy cosmic tricks of time & space, OK? We just need some easy help about

a strange dream! Please?"

We listened. Nothing. Big chance, yah. Sheila nodded like, figgers.

But then Crissy said, "Wait! Look!" So we did. On the far end of the wooden room we were in, a doorway appeared. I didn't think it was there before, but it was there very importantly now.

Crissy made sure as we walked through the doorway that we were touching each other. All 3 of us. She knowed I was right at least some.

So we walked through that doorway, deep in Clover-dale, not knowing what might happen, or where we might end up. I didn't even know if holding close would keep us together. It was a hopeful guess.

But something about mah Mommy Beagle living here, some or all of the time. It meant that Clover-dale had to take care of her in her old & sometimes sadness.

OK, then, I thinked, as we crossed through that doorway, Clover-dale, you take care of mah Mommy Beagle, so I am going to trust you with me & mah dear friends. I am going to trust you to understand.

It was raining.

Dream of Rain (Grand Finally!)

When you're a humble fella like your old pal Algernon, it means you are modest & low to the ground. The world is mostly outside of you, & so you look around & try to understand. And there are big guys a-plenty with tricky plans & planzy tricks to bend the world a little more to their own comfort & liking.

I used to be just another little guy waiting to get hustled into one of these plans or tricks, trying not to get stomped or demised 4or mah trouble. Somewhere along the way, I got to be a less than little guy because the big guys knowed I would be around writing down their many doings in mah newspaper. They liked their grand schemes being in print to boost their egos, but I don't think they liked as much that I would not write it how they liked it best.

So I am a sort of, I guess, middle guy, who still gets battered & bullied, but maybe a little less.

I get to go along on the big stories to write them down. I still go 4or the little guy's side every day of the week, but what I best do 4or all the little guys, & big guys too, is write it how I see it, straight & true, 4or them to read & know.

I say all this to explain how I sit in these stories, I think. And this sort of explains this new story, & I guess sort of doesn't.

Why did I have the dream of rain in Bags End with nobody left but me? And why did Sheils Bunny & Princess Crissy have this same dream?

I wondered if it was because I write to make sure the little guy knows what is going on also, since the big guys usually do. But maybe Sheila & Crissy too because big guys get things done with their fancy fast BunnyCycles & tricky smile magick. I guess I have mah friendly ways & beagleboy journalism to add to it all, but that's not enough by itself.

I hope some of us understand this long explain. I tried to as much

as you, Dear Readers.

So what me & Crissy & Sheila found through the next door in Clover-dale was that it was raining. And the other thing to say right away is that it was Bags End! I even used mah newfound sniffing powers to check, & it was true. We were back.

And it felt like in mah dreams too. Empty. But it didn't feel like a dream now.

"Keep close, beagle," Sheila grouched, but there was no real grump in her voice. She was, um, scared? Curious? Angry? I wasn't sure. I looked at Crissy & she was studying the walls near us.

"Is this the real Bags End or some kind of tricky really good Clover-dale fake?" I asked suddenly before I even thought it first.

Crissy motioned me & Sheila over to her studyings.

"Algernon, you asked me if I made Bags End, & I wasn't sure. I think some of my idears helped make it. Look here. My signature is deep in this wall. I wanted proof."

"Proof of what?" asked Sheila quietly.

Crissy looked close at the hard-to-see squiggly letters of her name. She said, "That this Bags End is real in its way."

"If it's real, where is everybody?" I said suddenly again. I guess I figgered it was Bags End-but-not but everyone in the real Bags End-but-not-not was OK.

Crissy turned to look at me. She talked very softly to me. "I would know if anyone was hurt or really lost. We just can't see them or sniff them."

I nodded unhappy but OK.

Sheila had been listening, but now she was ready to go, & that was to her Throne Room. We followed her through the rain, down a couple of levels, & along the hallway to the door with the crown picture on it, & a carrot on the crown. O! Yuk!

Her Throne Room was the same as always. Sheila hopped into her Throne like nothing was wrong in the world. Somehow Crissy knowed to join her in her thronish comfort, & I knowed to join mahself on mah little matt in the corner nearby.

I did not know how this was helping, but then . . . wait!

"It's not raining in here!"

Crissy looked surprised too.

Sheila just said, "This is my Throne Room, beagle!"

Crissy got up & looked out the door. "Still raining out there."

This was strange already, getting stranger.

Sheila relented in her big-guy-ness. "It's my purple eyes, beagle. Why do you think this room is my Throne Room? It's not that big."

"True," I said.

"When I first came to Bags End, I was exploring & found this room. It's like it was mine. It sniffs different to me. I don't know why."

OK. So Sheila brought us here not because she wanted some King time, but like a headquarters in this crisis. I admired her thinking but stayed quiet, figgering she admired it even better.

"Now what?" I asked.

Without opening even one purple eye to regard me, Sheila said, "We wait."

Crissy helpfully stood up again & put a jazz record on Sheila's phonograph to play. It was that Miles Davis guy. He always hears to me like when he's playing you better not interrupt or get in his way. Very Sheila-like.

So we waited in this strange real-but-weird-some-other-way Bags End. I didn't think I could take not doing something about all this, but I found mahself starting to doze on mah comfy matt.

I thinked I was only having a little nap with mah awake ears & I guess schnozola on duty, but when I looked over at the Throne & saw not Sheila & Crissy in their comforts, but Benny Big Dreams & that kind of Mommy Beagle, I leaped up from mah spot!

And splashed back down!

"Better start swimming, friend," said Benny not unfriendly. But still.

"But wake up first, Sonnyboy," smiled Mommy Beagle, not un-her-like.

And then I waked by using all mah might. But there was still water!

At least mah waking was back to Sheila & Crissy back in Sheila's Throne. Mah matt was on the floor so I was wetter.

They splashed over to me & 4or a moment we all just stood looking at each other.

Crissy got a strange look on her face.

"What, Crissy?" me & Sheila both said twice once.

"Did we do this on purpose to save the rest?"

Hmm.

"Was there more to the dream?" she asked, looking at me.

"I had it & had it & there was never a why or a how in it, Crissy," I said sadly, & more wetly.

Sheila motioned us back to her Throne, even me. We sat closely but dryly 4or right now. Then Crissy popped up again & fetched Sheila's phonograph & records & books, & put them all high up on her bookcase. Then she smiled & sat back down. Sheila hugged her close.

I had an idear, & I talked be4ore mah doubts could mass. "I have to go back to that dream & find Benny."

"He won't elude me," grouched Sheila.

"No," I said quiet. "Just me. I have to go deeper than I have so far."

Sheila & Crissy looked at me like I was the bravest of the brave. I wasn't but kept mah severe cowardism to mahself.

Then they did something really nice. They moved me between them, & dearly close, & they singed me a kind of sweet hmmm. I was watching the water coming in under the door, & thinking sadly how mah beloved homeland was slowly drowning, when I must have slept, because I found mahself back in the hallway alone.

OK, I was pretty tired of this dream's repeat tricks, & so I yelled out 4or Benny.

"Benny! Benny! Benny Big Dreams!" I yelled.

At first, nothing. But then Benny came paddling along in a kind of, um, floating boat-wagon I wondered if I had seen be4ore.

"Ahoy!" he cried, & I could see that sorta Mommy Beagle was with

him, in the back seat.

I climbed into the front seat next to Benny, & he put a vest on me, & buckled me in.

"Safety first," he said still friendly.

"Won't help," I grouched. "Beagles don't float."

"Sonnyboy," sorta Mommy Beagle said from the back seat.

"Who is protecting everyboy?" I demanded suddenly.

"Figger it out," Benny said. "Who sleeps better than everyone else?"

Hmm. "Wait. Ramie the Toy Tall Boy? I don't get it."

"Do you want me to explain or bring you to him?" asked Benny.

"Yes! Yes!"

"Which?"

"Benjamin, let's go," scolded sorta Mommy Beagle. Benjamin?

So Benny paddled the boat-wagon down a few rainy levels, & through a hallway to what looked like a cave instead of a door like usual.

"Is this the way to where Ramie is? This isn't Connecticut!" I said.

"Well, he isn't always there, Algernon" said sorta Mommy Beagle, who didn't call me Sonnyboy & looked less like her. Hm.

The cave got darker & dryer, & I guessed the boat-wagon had wheels to roll on. We came to a room crowded with things. Ramie was asleep on a bed.

"I have slept in dreams too but how does this help?" I asked.

Benny unbuckled & unvested me, & said, "The rest is up to you, my friend. Remember the advice you got on your travels." Then they rolled away to the water. I noticed that sorta Mommy Beagle wasn't really beagle-like anymore. Another hm. But they had kind of helped in their way.

Now what? As I walked up to sleeping Ramie, I wished 4or a smarter noggin but I had to use what I had 4or brainbone, I guess.

Ramie was curled into himself, sleeping hard, on what looked more like just an old mattress than a real bed.

I walked up to him & sorta hunched down & just looked.

"What are you protecting Bags End from?" I asked out loud, not thinking he would talk back.

"The world is dangerous," he muttered. Hm.

"But we're safe here," I said back.

"No. I had a nightmare. It was all swept away. I couldn't protect everyone."

Hm some more. "By rain?"

He muttered some no-words & rolled over.

Then mah brainbone flipped out. "It was your dream. Not mine or Sheila's or Crissy's! But I still don't understand." He didn't say nothing.

But now I had an idear. If it was his nightmare, then the advice was 4or him. Let it flow, the past is inevitable, behold the path.

In mah best Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow voice I said, "On your fweet, dwogface! Twime to mwarch untwil I sway twoops dwismwished!" Wow! I almost rebelled against mahself!

But Ramie is agreeable to marching so he got up & mwarched, I mean marched, behind me.

I had an idear & I couldn't say it was good. But we marched until

we reached the water, & then I Lisa-voice ordered him to lift me on top of his head 4or mah "mwilitary dwyness," whatever that means.

Ramie is so tall that he more splashed along than swimming.

"Spwash! 2! 3! 4!" I ordered.

I knowed that Crissy could watch mah dreams, & I figgered that she & Sheila would be watching us now.

Ramie is right that it is a dangerous world. That's why Crissy had to leave her own world, & that's why she guards Bags End. But he got so afraid by his dream that he panicked & was hiding in his cave in his sleeping. I could not make him un-protect us guys but I had to show him a better way to do that.

So we splash-marched to a place in Bags End I knowed in dreams where there was a picture that could help.

"Twoops, hwalt!" I cried.

Ramie halted in front of the picture of the pretty girl bent down to look at some Faeries. This picture is the way in Dream Bags End to go to the Creature Common.

I have learned that sleeping & awake are not opposites but just different kinds. So when I called up to Princess Crissy, it wasn't so hard 4or her to hear me.

I had this idear to show Ramie that we were all stronger & safer together, even with our strange & different ways. It would be the opposite of me alone in rainy Bags End. I just hoped Crissy understood mah hopeful idear.

Now I talked as closely into Ramie's scared sleeping noggin as I could. Very nicely, but 4or him to hear & to do both.

"We have to protect each other, Ramie. Not just you protecting us, but us protecting you. I think that's where it goes wrong. We protect or get protected by size. Or we try to do it alone. I don't understand all these things, but I think your dream of me in the rain was like your doubt leaking out of you. A message."

I took a breath, & then I hoped & talked more.

"When I count to 3, we're gonna step through this picture to waked up Bags End. Then, if you trust me, we will do more."

I took a another breath, & hoped I remembered how to count to 3.

"1! 2! 3! Mwarch, swoldier!" I cried.

And we did. Crissy made sure, just in case, & she & Sheila were waiting 4or us there.

Crissy hugged me. "Now what, beagle?" demanded Sheila.

I motioned 4or Crissy to take me off the noggin of the still-sleeping Ramie.

"Ramie, I'm not Lisa-Marie Chow now. I'm you're old pal Algernon," I said all friendly. "Wake up, guy!"

Ramie waked but still sleepy & loyal to his Lazybug roots.

Then I took another breath. Crissy smiled at me, & Sheila nodded.

"Let it flow, Ramie. Let it flow!" And that is when I hoped Crissy knowed what all I was thinking.

Out of the rainy dark came Bags End friends, like almost all I could think of . . .

Theer was Peter Bunny, the famili daddy

Theer was crazee bumping Alexander

Theer was Margy Bunny who
lovs Bug Buny & Run Roder

Theer was that nice
old Mrss. Beezlee

Theer was Sweet Polly El

Theer was Leona Lyon

Theer was Crazey Betsee
Buny Pillow

Theer was nis Ally Leperd

Theer was smart Lory Buny

Theer was the reel Lisa
Maree Chowe

Theer wer friends Deny
& Cory Pupy

Theer was sqweeking Jill
Boot

Theer was Lisas' sister
Elizabeth

Theree was Glenna the
Germana

Thee was Sheren
Buny

Theer was Jakky Kloun

Theer was Browny Pony

Theer wer Angys

Theer was Oliver Owl

Theer wer Blondys 3

Theer was Tomy Tiger

Theer wass Pippi

. . . And there were many more, but I was not just gonna let them float on by or Bags End strangely drown. I nodded to Crissy, & she smiled tricky, & what happened next was that with Ramie's help each Bags End friend was passed through the awake Bags End picture portal of the snowy building, each & every one safe & dry, the past is inevitable, to the Creature Common!

It took awhile to get everyone through, & I noticed that the rains & floods were drying up until it was soon just me & Crissy & Sheila.

"After you, King," I said with mah irresistible politeness.

Sheila nodded & gave Crissy a kiss on her hopping way in.

"You did it, Algernon," Crissy said, all proud.

"All I did was guess good. We all did the rest."

She nodded.

"Are you coming?"

Now she was sad. "No. I can't anymore."

"I will come see you later on then," I said.

She smiled & nodded, & I loved her smile so much I didn't notice how she had lifted me up, & gived me a little push through the picture to the Creature Common.

Well, it seems like we were expected because just as we all were arrived, those Royal Thumbs announced a Royal Thumbs Production "4or the Young, & the Young at Heart!"

We were given a display of the finest per4ormances. The White Bunny flew hopping through the air to start the show, almost like a good luck charm.

Then the Major Bears came out & did their dancing & wild jumping around act.

Then that little purple-furred Pirth fellow with his ribbons & bows did another kind of dance, but it was sort of soft & low & friendly to all.

There was this friendly spotted doggy sorta fella who told a few jokes. He kept saying, "I got a million of them, folks!" but I didn't think he told that many.

Then the Royal Thumbs introduced these wiggly Ladies Toe who singed a pretty little song & did a nice little dance.

There were bloo-eyed black Kittees who jumped around a lot with black tails & white paws & all.

And even that tricky little pandy bear & some very old fella did a sort of dancing song in a strange tongue.

Finally, a handsome white Bear in a nice hat & scarf came out & said, "We of the X's Traveling Carnival of Mysteries & Wonders thank the Royal Thumbs 4or assembling tonight's Grand Production. And we all want to thank our friends from Bags End & our watching friends in Imagianna. Truly we are all grateful to be one another's friends."

I looked around & I noticed that Ramie was sitting with a pretty smiling lady watching the show. I nodded. This is where he is some of the time. I suppose this made sense. He looked safe & sure of all of us again.

Then the Grand Finally came when many many of us sang the Fraggle Rock TV song. Like this:

Dance your cares away!
 Worries 4or another day!
 Let the music play!
 Down in Fraggile Rock!

All I could say was wow to such talent. Tonight it was Bags End's turn to be entertained, but I figgered one fine day we would take the stage at Bags End Auditorium, & do some entertaining ourselves 4or these good friends. Or we would all join up & look out!

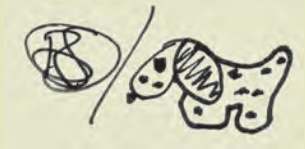
Eventually, the rest of the Bags End guys were tired & went home, & I noticed that our Bags were on a chair in the Common. Like in Connecticut.

Oh. Hmm. Well, OK. Why not! Behold the path? Yah, guy, that one too.

It was always like this, I think, till we 4orgot. We protected each other without having to think about it. The world had no names & lines between.

I don't know, that's just how it felt tonight.

I am finishing this on Milne's Porch in mah comfy armchair. It was good.



THE END.



Ace Boggess



***“Despite the Crisis and Its Many Worries,
Have You Experienced a Moment of Grace?”***

[question asked by Raymond Soulard, Jr.]

Yesterday, a tulip
began its run into bloom,
orange & yellow,
like the fountain-pen blade
of a candle's flame.

Isolated in its bed,
socially distanced
from other flowers,
to avoid the spread
of death among
last week's lilies,
it rose like a rocket's trail,

bright in the moment,
scale model
of a burning bush.

I stared for minutes
while smoking &
didn't cough or choke,
avert my gaze
from blessed light.
All within was
calm as sleep.

I'd forgive the end
if it came then.
It didn't, &
when my ember snuffed,
I went inside.

* * * * *


Leia Friedman

Twice Visiting the Guardians of This Sacred Thai Waterfall

[Travel Journal]

i.

On the last leg of my solo Southeast Asia backpacking journey back in 2015, I spent a few weeks in Thailand. Chiang Mai's canals and rapid, erratic stone streets reminded me of my hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts.

"You have to go to Pai," I overheard after a yoga class one day. When I arrived back at my hostel, I learned that Pai is like the hippy mecca of northern Thailand. Sign me up!

It has been five years since that journey, the journey that this story is about. By the time I began writing about it, another opportunity to visit Thailand popped up. My father, sister, and stepmother are living there now. I decided to write this narrative about the journey to Pai in 2015 while I travel back to there in 2020 and retrace my steps, this time with my partner in love and life, Matty.

ii. February 2015

The three-hour bus ride over and through the mountains was unceasingly nauseating. Crammed in with other backpackers, we made the most of it with casual conversation about what we planned to do in Pai. "Visit café with the kombucha-making classes," I scrawled in my journal.

I also learned that Pai has some pristine forests, waterfalls, caves, rivers, and stunning fields. In town, there's apparently a hostel/bar that will serve psychedelic mushroom smoothies if you show up around 5:30 in the evening, and sit and wait inconspicuously. That sounded like another thing I wouldn't want to miss.

I booked a reservation ahead of time at a hippy place with bungalows called Sabai Gardens. "Sabai, sabai," a Thai expression, has no literal translation in English. It means something like "slowly, slowly" or peaceful, happy, comfortable, chill. It is a reminder to go about things with patience and ease, and to allow for the natural flow of life.

I had intentions of doing some deep reflection and some writing on this journey, and I had an image in my mind of a bungalow overlooking a peaceful field with a nice porch to sit out on. When I arrived at Sabai Gardens, the huts were a lot more shabby than I had bargained for. No porch to sit on, no field to gaze at, and the palm frond roof was leaking dust and crumbly pieces of leaves onto the bed. A bit dismayed, I left. I wandered down the road, feeling the weight of my heavy pack and the heat of the noon sun.

Within a few moments, I came upon Ing Doi and Yawning Fields Guest House. They had exactly what I was looking for: cozy, hand-built wooden bungalows situated right beside a neighbor's cow pastures, with trees and mountains in the distance.

I fell in love with my place, bungalow #12. There was a pond with fish and lotus flowers blooming right outside my door. On my first day, I sat on the cushioned day-bed on my porch and sketched this view. It's one of my favorite drawings I've ever made:



iii. January 2020

Matty and I were tired and nauseated from the journey and, as soon as we arrived in Pai, I had to use the WiFi to do a bunch of online course work. I was grouchy and he was tired and sore. So far, it was not magical like last time.

I had forgotten the name of where I stayed in 2015, so earlier that week I pulled up a map and looked in the general direction of the rice paddies. All I could remember was my fabulous bungalow with the cows grazing in the distance and the cranes sitting on their backs eating bugs all day. When I saw the name “Sabai Gardens,” it rang a bell and I figured that it must be where I had stayed back in 2015.

We set off walking and Matty, carrying his packs plus one of mine, tripped and fell on the way. Thankfully he was OK, but I felt bad, and worried that my plan to re-do my 2015 trip was a bad idea. We showed up at Sabai Gardens exhausted and hot.

I experienced the familiar sinking feeling of when expectations fall short. After seeing a few of the rooms, with the same dried leaf sprinkle dusting the beds and floors, I felt more despairing than ever. The volunteer who was showing us around said we were welcome to leave our bags and check out other accommodations in the area. Little did I know, I was truly repeating the events of 2015, even more closely than intended!

We hopped across a small gully and found Ing Doi and Yawning Fields. I recognized the manager, Mink, right away; I giggled at the absurdity. While the plan was to repeat some of the fun activities of my last trip, I never expected that I’d be retracing my steps so exactly.

It was no surprise, then, when Mink showed us to the last vacant bungalow abutting the fields: #12.

iv. February 2015

Pai is set in a valley. The roads are light and dusty, and clear streams glisten as they wind here and there alongside the road. There is a town center and, beyond that, golden fields that flow to the forest’s edge. Above the treetops, majestic mountain ranges stand guard, hazy off in the distance.

At the kombucha café, I met a young Argentine man who was also solo backpacking. His name was Enrique, and he had just finished a several-weeks-long trek in Borneo. We compared notes and decided we both wanted to rent a scooter one day and drive out to some of the trails in the jungle. Enrique struck me as bold, rugged, and confident, yet gentle. I swooned over his soft green eyes and smooth, tan arms.

I inquired with a local about the best hiking adventures, and she drew me a map to a trail that would lead to a confluence of three waterfalls and some small caves. She warned me that I would need water shoes or strap-on sandals, because there were about twenty river crossings along the hike. Enrique and I said goodbye, with a plan to meet back up in a few days, rent a scooter, and embark on this adventure.

* * *

That same evening, I decided to try the mushroom smoothies because . . . when in Pai. The mushroom hostel/bar was already filling up with tourists, some more discreet than others. I found myself a seat near two brothers. "I have always wanted to trip and I can't believe I'm finally gonna do it!" one whispered to the other.

Within a half hour I was giving some rendition of a psychedelics-for-beginners speech with information about set and setting, intentions, managing difficult experiences, and other nuances. Everyone who showed up seemed to be on their maiden voyage to imbibing the mushroom. I had the sinking feeling that I was getting too far into something I hadn't bargained for.

A young Thai man came around and said to each of us: "you want the mushroom shake? Pay me 750 Baht" (around \$25). He collected the cash and noted the number of shakes.

In about forty minutes, he came back around with drink trays of 7-Eleven-style paper cups with straws and lids, containing frozen, bright blue concoctions. We began to drink.

I finished mine pretty quickly because I did not want to become trip sitter for these couple of dozen tourists. I just knew that that wasn't gonna work for me today. I bid everyone farewell and strolled out, overhearing as I left, "oh man, I'm starting to feel it." Perfect timing, I thought.

The walk back to town was dark, so the stars and moon lit the way. I stumbled over a few potholes and felt alone, trepidatious yet exhilarated. I sensed a rising in my navel and observed my insides clenching lightly in expectation. A great thirst overtook me so I decided to head to the night market and buy some water.

Downtown Pai is pretty touristy at night. Locals come out and set up tables of souvenirs, jewelry, art, and plenty of street food. It was an assault on my senses, walking through random plumes of BBQ smoke, cigarettes, steam from clay pots of tea, incense.

This evening I noticed a lot of musicians busking. I realized I had my egg shaker in my backpack (*Hippy Tip #34: never travel without one*). Suddenly I was struck by the urge to accompany a musician, and I spotted a Thai man playing guitar and singing on the corner. I walked up, shaking the egg shaker in the rhythm of his song. His face broke into an enormous smile and he waved for me to come join him.

Miraculously, a crowd began to form. People started dancing with each other, and the energy built. I felt myself feeding off of him, him feeding off of me, us feeding off of the excitement of the crowd, who were feeding off of us. It felt overpowering. As the mushrooms spread little tendrils of golden energy throughout my body, I felt like I was in a moment of spinning, glowing perfection that would never end.

After a few songs, I motioned to him that I'd be heading off soon. We received a heartfelt applause and he gave me a CD and a photo. He thanked me and gave me a big hug. "I'll find you on Facebook!" I said as I walked away. But the CD never worked, and I couldn't find him online anywhere.

I continued through the streets and alleys, feeling that I was in a playground. I played my egg shaker with a few other performers, and then sat down and ordered a hearty bowl of hot pot. As I drank the broth, I felt my body coming back into its usual arrangement.

Soon, I headed back to my guesthouse, nodding lovingly to Sabai Gardens as I passed by, slowly, slowly.

* * *

Later that week, it was time for the jungle/waterfall adventure with Enrique. We decided to economize and just buy one scooter for the day, so we met up at a rental place.

Upon seeing him for a second time, I noticed how much younger he looked than what I remembered. I became filled with anxieties about riding with him (especially because I had already been in two scooter accidents on this Asia trip alone), and trekking with him (we'd be pretty far from civilization and I didn't have much survival training).

But the scooter ride was easy and the scenery breathtaking. Rolling rice paddies, gardens, and wild fields flanked us on either side. Although I was hesitant, I offered to split a tab of LSD with Enrique when we got closer to the trailhead. This was a particularly pure and strong brand, known as Sparkle. He agreed excitedly and we embarked on the journey for the journey.

Finding the trailhead proved difficult, and we drove around searching for it for a while. Finally, we were confident enough that we'd found the right access point. Colors became brighter and the leaves seemed to twinkle and swirl a little bit by the time we left the road and crossed into the forest. We walked for an hour and a half, sharing stories and laughter, never coming across one other person (but we did cross the river, about once every 5 minutes).

The scenery was remarkable. The forest supports a tremendous biodiversity of plant, animal, and fungi life. Every color of the spectrum represented itself in bold, sometimes alien glory. I remember us pausing for 5 to 10 minutes in a particularly beautiful spot and meditating together. It was then that I felt how much motion there was all around us, yet how much stillness in myself. I felt so embedded in the web of life, in the solar system, in the multiverse. We ate a few of the strawberries we had brought, and moved on.

Another hour later, I began to worry about how long we had gone without seeing many people, and how long we had left to go. I had lost count of how many times we plodded across the stone-filled stream. Would we make it out of the forest before dark? I began to worry, remembering other outdoor adventures where I had made mistakes and ended up in dangerous situations. Within a few moments, though, we were met by the sound of crashing water.

Just as it had been described to me, three gentle waterfalls poured from different heights of rock and met together to form one giant, crashing beam into a crystal pool below. We stripped off all of our clothes, so sticky, muddy and wet, threw them on the ground with our bags, and stepped into the water.

It felt like a baptism. I waded into the pool and felt the cold, cleansing energy lapping against my calves, then my waist, then my chest. I dunked under and surrendered.

I was so elated, and played in the water and crawled in the muddy caves for a good hour. I couldn't help but imagine, as I looked down at my mud-streaked body, what it was like to be a human thousands of years ago. Did they also have moments of looking down at their body and imagining that they were a human in another time, past or future? Were they aware of such a concept even existing?

v. January 2020

Matt and I were also economizing with one scooter. We left the guesthouse a little late, and I reluctantly popped half a tab of Sparkle into my mouth. I was tired, and felt nervous about tripping. Still, for



(purely!) journalistic integrity, I knew I had to for this pilgrimage back to the waterfall.

So far, we hadn't had any accidents while riding in Thailand, but that didn't mean that I wasn't emitting noises of fear and concern whenever he would take a sharp turn or speed up to pass someone. This dynamic had caused us to have several spats on the trip. I would cry out in fear—he would tell me I needed to learn to calm down—I would get upset at his tone—he would get upset at me being upset at him.

We found the trailhead easily and headed into the forest. I felt the familiar greeting of the plants, animals, insects, and fungi of the forest. Sunlight twinkled on every surface.

I had strapped on my Tevas, and Matt was still wearing sneakers. He had some crappy flip-flops in his bag, but I told him he might be OK for a while just with the sneakers. I had forgotten how many river crossings there were.

Earlier in the trip we had stayed in Koh Phi Phi, lovely islands in southwestern Thailand. One night, we tried to walk back to our hotel via the beach. The tide was coming in and, at a certain point, the sandy beach was no longer sand. A river was forming, and I happened to be wearing Tevas while Matt was in sneakers. I offered him a piggyback across the river. He laughed at me, but I insisted we try. Fifty feet later, we were on the other side, Matt's sneakers perfectly dry, me feeling strong and proud.

As we approached the first river crossing on the jungle hike, I offered Matty another piggy back ride. He laughed at me again, but I insisted I could again. With the backpack strapped onto my front, he hopped on my back and I forded the river like a champ!

* * *

We ended up discussing our relationship and hashing out, in a productive way, some fights we had had on the trip. The forest is a really great place to work things out, I thought. And taking a break from the dialogue every 5 to 10 minutes helped. Matty would hop on my back, squeeze his legs around my torso and kiss my ear while I carried him across the stream. This provided a nice, comforting respite from an otherwise challenging topic. We laughed every time, too. "This is a good way for you to get your co-regulation," he said.

An ongoing challenge between us is that when I feel upset, I want co-regulation—that's when being in the presence of another person gives support for me to calm down and regulate my emotions. Matty, on the other hand, is an auto-regulator—he prefers to calm down and regulate on his own.

About five river crossings before we arrived at the waterfall, I tapped out and had Matty put on his sandals. We moved faster that way and, soon enough, we heard the familiar sound of crashing water.

vi. February 2015

Enrique and I tore ourselves away from the waterfall playground. The light was definitely fading. As we walked back to our stuff, I noticed a couple of honeybees following us. We turned a corner and suddenly there were more bees, all swarming around our clothes and bags. They were crawling in all of our stuff, probably attracted to the sticky, sweet strawberries we had brought.

Up to this point in my life, I had never been stung by a bee. I am allergic to most things. I used to get three different shots each week just for all of my allergies. I had no Epi-Pen with me (nor had I ever used one), no Benadryl, and there was no one else around. Enrique felt afraid of going closer into the bee territory (terroritory?), and I felt my anxiety grow as we had no plan of action and the sun was dipping lower in the sky. We were wet, completely naked, and our clothes were covered in honeybees.

I decided to pick up one item of clothing and see what would happen. My heart racing, I bent down and slid my finger into the strap of my bra, slowly lifting it off the top of the pile. All of the bees rose into flight, moving away from my clothing into a dotted vortex around me. I walked a few steps away from the pile of stuff, just as the bees started to descend back down onto our bags, our clothes

and, now, me.

I felt a tickle, the little buzzing gust of wind of a honeybee, vibrating just outside my ear. Another bee landed on my chin and walked across my upper lip, checking out my nostrils. I closed my eyes, because all around me all I could see and hear were bees, looking for a place to land. Their little legs tapping across my body felt like some kind of Russian roulette.

In the headspace that only a person tripping on acid can access, I invited a sense of awe and appreciation for these beautiful honeybees, the guardians of this sacred waterfall clearing. I opened my eyes and looked at the bees, up close, in complete fascination. Every detail of their little bodies was like a perfect, painted work of art. With more care than I have ever walked in my life, I brought the bra 10 feet away and laid it on a quiet rock.

I went back and forth from the pile to the rock, bringing one or two things at a time, all the while accompanied by dozens of tickling honeybee friends. Enrique finally decided to join me and so the two of us, still naked, completed the transfer of our stuff and slowly began the hike back. We left an offering of two smashed strawberries in the clearing where we initially had laid our clothes and bags.

"Thank you, beautiful bees!" I said as we left the waterfall.

* * *

Enrique and I half walked, half jogged out of the forest. I remember laughing as we galloped through the river crossings, feeling splashes of water spray up my shorts but continuing to run anyway. I think we made it out in half the time it took to go all the way in.

Enrique said he was OK to drive, so I hopped on the back of the motorbike. The sun was slowly sinking toward some hazy mountains in the distance, a poetic exterior to our own comedown. The golden light kissed stalks of garlic we passed on both sides of us; fields and fields of garlic. We pulled over to watch the sun officially set.

Enrique leaned over the fence and pulled an onion out of the ground, brushed the dirt off, and took a bite. I laughed my head off. He offered it to me, and at first I declined. Soon, the temptation was too much. When in Pai, I thought, and bit into the juicy bulb like it was an apple in the garden of Eden.



vii. January 2020

The bees welcomed us to the waterfall. I was careful to pack our clothes away, and I kept our food (no fresh fruit this time!) stored in Ziploc bags inside the backpack. For some reason I felt modest, even though Matty and I were alone, and I decided to keep my underwear on as we waded into the pool.

The chill took my breath away. Within a few moments I was covered in goose bumps, so we made our way out. The bees remained our friendly companions and, for the second time, I left the magical waterfall without one sting.

On the ride out, we discovered that there were no onion fields after all. All we saw was garlic. It's possible that I mistook a young garlic as an onion back in 2015 with Enrique, or that the farmers had shifted their crop choice.

At any rate, when we pulled over to watch the sun set, Matty asked if I would steal one and eat it. We both, after having farmed together for the last year out in rural Connecticut, decided we would

leave the crops be and appreciate them from afar.

viii.

Back in 2015, after Enrique and I returned from our exhilarating adventure, we ate some Pad Thai and then went back to my place. We tried having sex, but it just wasn't working for either of us. I felt, for so long, like it was such a crappy ending to an otherwise amazing, unforgettable day. At the time, it played into a growing narrative I had—that my sex life was cursed.

When Matty and I got back from dinner, some of the guests of Ing Doi were gathered around a fire, talking and laughing. We hung out with them for a while, and then headed back to #12 as we had an early bus to catch the next morning.

We showered and climbed into bed. Snaking our arms and legs around each other, we nuzzled together in a big, tangled hug as we do every night before falling asleep. Cuddled into my love's warm chest, I closed my eyes and rested in his embrace. Home is a feeling I have when I'm with him, more than I feel at home in any specific place.

I kissed his neck, and then his face, and then his lips. He looked at me and smiled.

I'm so glad that the curse got reversed.

* * * * *





A Thought Foray

**Or, some thoughts as to what
my writing is about . . .**

i.

Perhaps most essentially
something of a struggle
with self-reference—

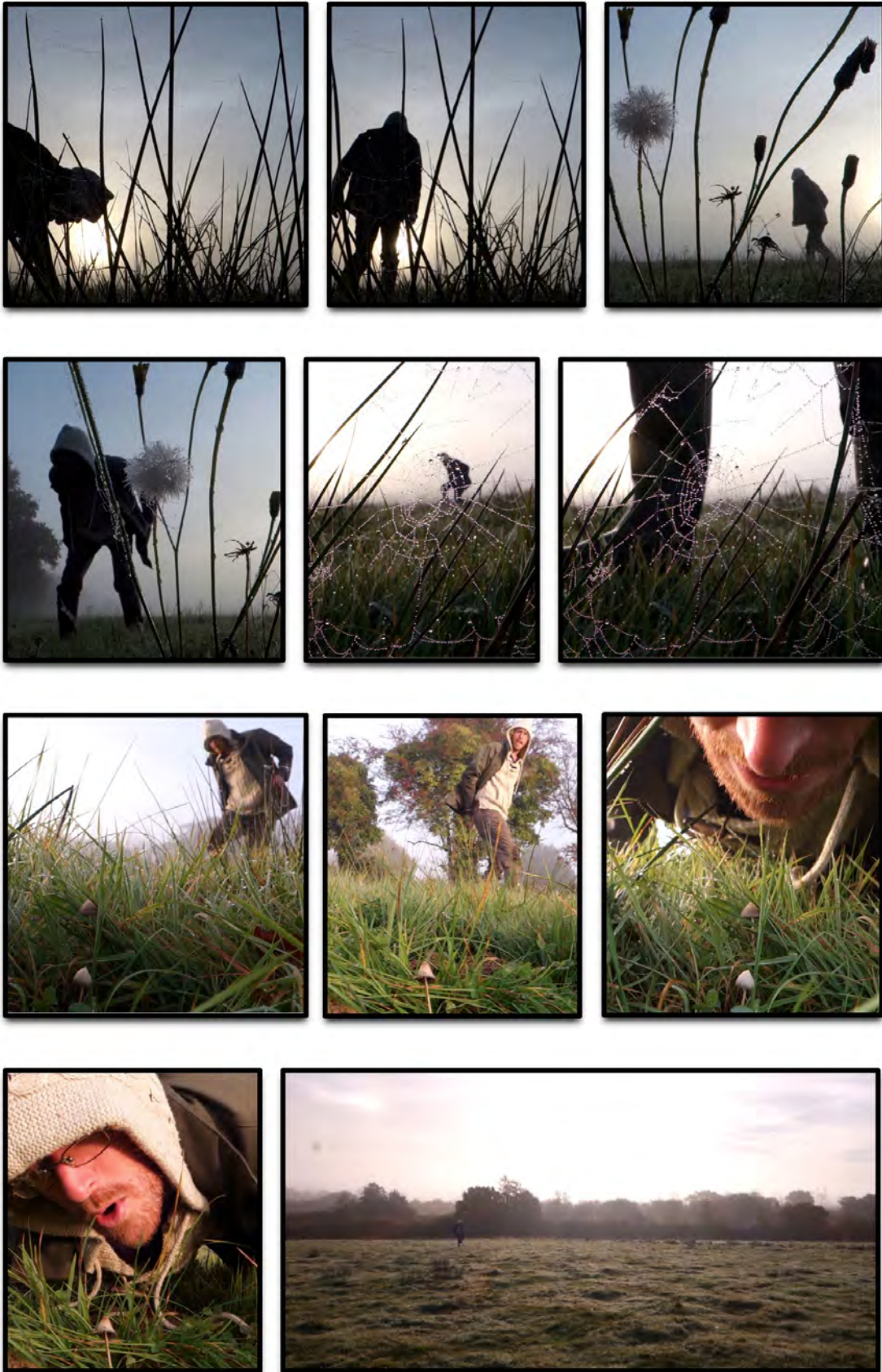
Although perhaps now
I become more comfortable
with speaking in and out
at the same time.

Perhaps once-upon-a-time,
She worried about how much
She was giving away,
because everything she wrote
in forked tongues spoke.

*Gardening is gardening,
Yet this garden is always
The garden, and no garden at all,
an opportunity to think
about not choosing both, either,
for it was already more than that.*

How deep does it go? this delusion
that boils choice down to a decision
between two paths, a fork in the road?
I don't know why we cannot see
how free will is more like the tree—
that tree growing in time, and this one
growing in eternity, and those

Trees growing from the seeds
stuck in our throats, wild songs
that mean as much to bird as man,
that knit together what was already bound
to be poetry, an ever-present his-hystory
whose rhythmic saint stutters lurch
towards the thing beyond the word
that feels for itself



Sam Knot

in the writing of nine lines.
 Because it seemed to grow one step
 at a time, and I want it to stop soon,
 or pause I guess, as if for breath,
 or paws I suppose, a play on words.
 Because in this suspension of seriousness,
 the great beast padding through,
 the forest lit by lunar diffusion,
 resists the inevitable leap—

That hungers after its own profusion.

ii.

Poetry then
 is pointing fingers
 at pointing fingers,
 which is the something else
 that seems to happen whenever
 I try to explain myself?

*Why would I have to explain myself
 to someones who understood
 the differences between madness and insanities
 before I could? Have known all along
 that madness is what lets meaning roam
 where meaning needs to go for life
 to mean anything at all. Insanity is simply
 failing to provide the necessary container
 for such activity. Ah, the self-container!*

It is the city that should do this, society
 as a hole that the mad one fences 'round
 or, well, lines with stones—society
 should contain itself, and leave us
 wonder the borders in broken peace,
 until we are thirsty or holy with self
 impotence, limp warrior dicks wagging themselves
 to horror story hardness—an inelegant dance
 that becomes beautiful in its difference
 that learns from itself about what is appropriate

*and when, and when it agrees with the milk of breath
 in the honeycomb chest of injurious blessings,
 gold bleeds into the social hole, wells up
 in our eyes when we look upon **our** lives
 in **their** strangeness, in all their formulaic
 never-to-be-repeated-ness, and know the value
 of that which we cannot own, those selves*

of our selves which we cannot know,
 without deciding on which differences
 were already there, there, *there*,
 until we hear how many voices—
 how many voice is here.

iii.

Shhhhhh

Shhhhhh

Should say something about shoulds
 insofar as that should say something
 about Nature, that is Our Nature,
 and Nature in itself, that is Our Nature—
 and Nature in itself, that is Our Nature.

Parts of it are taboo, parts of it are illegal,
 the discussion around these matters is ongoing,
 while conspicuous in its absence is any notion
 of banning ourselves from any *real* place, space,
 not even on the mountain face, so go where you like,
 but not *inside* me—you I mean—the cave of bones—

the sea that foams 'round the ongoing discussion
 'round the cosmic campfire where the wind blows
 letters to the editor to burn, elemental discussions
 that form the thread of what could be called the big
 small talk, stuff that sweats philosophical heat
 at the heart of making sense of anything—

an education in the ridiculous sorely lacking,
 self-taught by doodles in the margins, while chef
 ancient chief of the clan of good taste says,
“perhaps we are moving too fast,”¹ and might be right,
 as might always might, according to the wronged reason.

I joked: *my stand on mushrooms is when you
 walk into a field looking for the little buggers,
 and then realize you're standing on them.* People laughed—

or so the computer told me. One said: *WhEEEEEE*
apply grazing loophole! I liked it, because I didn't feel
 like clicking on the heart, perhaps I should have chosen
 the laughing face? But lest these options make me seem
 like a dead thing, I expressed myself more humanely: *mmm*
loop-holes, ain't never scene a loop without a hole, a
whole, or t 0 0, innit? Because it makes me mad how meaning
 gets broken down by machine reading, such that an algorithm
 might diagnose you as ripe for conversion—*religious irruption*—

to psychosis, based on your word choices, or lack of them,
in comparison to **“25 years of text from the *New York Times*
(NYT), which includes 42,833,581 sentences.”**² All of them normal.

iv.

Yet I question my own machine, that discombobulates words
into etymological atoms I don't know the meaning of,
and plays games with sounds that are not sounds,
bouncing around the cavern that is no cavern,
filled with an electric jelly that is
an elected trick jelly, a formless
poser of information, a singular poetic datum
that might perhaps lead to the contracted confusion of
I?

One of the senses in witch mushrooms never were taboo
or illegal, or otherwise not to be used, was in the sense
that they simply are themselves, growing in the fields
or forests or any kind of shit. Very probably they already were
themselves before we became us, even as they drifted like space dust
throughout the impossible non-local non-nows that we might suppose
may once have existed. The kind of thing a cow might accidentally ingest,
or a curious deer might extend the taste of your own tongue to lick,
cannot possibly be made illegal. It would be like banning God,
who is so dead its body keeps spelling itself in different ways,
a process of underwriting undermining law. When I blaspheme,
it is seek-reetly spelt differently, as in *l'awed above*
as in *AHA! Blaha blah blah blaha haha hahahahas-pheme?*

Pronoun said *fay-may* by ancient Greeks? Personification
of fame and re-noun: her favor notability / her wrath
scandalous rumors! **“A tremendous gossip, Pheme was said
to have pried into the affairs of mortals and gods, then
repeated what she learned, starting off at first
with just a dull whisper, but repeating it louder each time, until
everyone knew.”**³ So everyone should know that they have always
been allowed to graze, mindless as cows, moo-ving slowly through
the fields of feeling, breathing steams that condense onto
spider's webs, speaking the true language of being
that animals are not allowed to know
they know

v.

You know I did this once? I was so excited to find them growing
right where I had ended up, that I decided to celebrate
by writing a poem, and going out into the fields one morning,
and telling them how much I loved them, in language filthy clean

before biting their heads off, nibbling their stems, and sucking them direct from the wet grass, direct from the earth **ITSelf**—

the old me would have had to say **HERself**, but I decided while writing about *the poet* that I was bored with worrying whether or not to call it him or her or them. Just call it **it** you id-iot! I doubt it will be offended, it is mostly you who is at risk from depersonalization, it is quite happy to go on being itself regardless of what you call it, anyway it is well known that it has a mind of its own—another old joke

What is IT? g0dd or information technology?

or is it? Shall I take another digression? Do I really have a choice but to speak as we spoke of the archetype of the ego? Everyone knows how 'ee sounds like 'ee goes. Another marker for conversion to psychosis is *the frequent use of words associated with sound*—like onomatopoeia? Like how bombastic words are such a blast they might convert one to anything? To no longer being able to tell whether *whisper* sounds a little like whispering even if you shout it, because of the *hiss*, like a snake makes, settling down now to writhing around with a bunch of animal sounds, nice concrete meanings it would be silly to get confused about. About the difference between **I** and **it**.

vi.

That is how Freud had it: I was kind of sandwiched between, on the one hand, some thing that was over **I**, which was my conscience, witch wasn't really mine apparently, but something social **I** internalized and, on the other hand, an it, an automatic constellation of sucks and fucks and flights and fights and shit and cum and spit and pussy juice, maybe, or maybe that's just me? But aren't I feathers and claws and planets and plants and stars and boring? I mean . . . all that I am is just the difference between it and what I am not? *Or is this I something else, something in itself?*

“The origin of the ego lies in the self archetype”⁴—That's right, ladies and gentlemen, the origin of our confusion lies in something else to be confused about—but only if you're really into trouble-making /in to trouble making you: **“The Self, according to Jung, was the sum total of the psyche, with all its potential included.”**⁴ You can stop here, if you want, there is no need to go on, if this last gasp transcend-but-include fulfils you, there is no need to risk infinite loops, to dance robotic between two mirrors, to feel trapped by the idea that tried to free you, to reify the formal structure of sense-making in the sense that is no sense, not even the sense of senses, that is a simple logical dictum required to avoid the awkward paradox of an inconclusive set that tries to include itself. *Just tell yourself the self is the total sum of what I am and forget the logic of breathing,*

*of not being able to tell precisely where you end and Nature begins
to tell you things about permeable boundaries, about no such things,
about how one requires places of exchange that no one owns to function
right, to breathe, how all that is, needs space to be, a space that is
neither you nor me, nor a thing in itself, and not-not-you-nor-me either.
Not the web, not the fly, not the spider. And not simply this not thing,
not merely negation, not only the not in relation to some posited what.*

*Knots. Knots that we can tie our minds up in, knots that can manifest
muscularly, knots that might be necessary, contingents of hearts,
the slow musics of untying oneself deep in the bowels of thought,
where thought becomes feeling I mean, and feeling fights to become
known, no resistance but itself, or self itself, know resistance.
A sacred profanity, an insistence on quest
on questioning—resistance
itself an opening*

vii.

*This was the poem I spoke to the mushrooms, the little ones
I love, and fear, whom give what I don't know and take
what I don't know. They who are not me, the never identical
that I cannot seem to help but identify with. I got down on my knees
and bent my thoughtless face towards them. Elf hat, I said, and
gobbled one down. Nipple head, another, gone. Pixie tits
on tiny sticks, and I am getting carried away with their
feeling-taste, their cool slippy softs. Cocky little clitoris
of motherfucking earth, a little too fierce? Dew . . .
window . . . of the rainbow sky, yes that's better.
Dream house of the grrrr
raising grass. Yes. Ultimate ummmmm
brella terms of more-than-human nature. Aye.
Gold min'd expanding outside inner-
space parachute of paradise, mmm, nigh-shhhh.
Ye panspermeating infinitely purmutating
purring mutant souls of the soil!*

*Grrrrr
eat me!*

viii.

*I had to wonder, later, after another round of dirty praise words,
if I should not have been so . . . so . . . so what? So frivolous?
So potty-mouthed? So silly, so naughty, so tricky, so rude?
Just what in the fuck did I think I was up to? Do you know
who it was that made me question myself like this? It was me.*

Reflecting on you. And you in this case were an indigenous Mexican. You were an older woman who I looked up to, because I guessed that you knew things I didn't, which of course you did. You do. You were so sweet and calm and quiet, in the night of candlelight and I recognized the mother upon your alter. And I wondered if I had fucked her, *fucked myself*? How I ever felt it was appropriate to gobble you down in broad daylight, carried away to the point where suddenly I realized I had eaten more than I meant to and I blew you out into the sky like water from an unnatural dolphin's blow hole. A strange mammal falling pink-white onto its back into a new/anew/a knew element, steam and laughter rising into the autumn blue.

*Mushrooms grow 'round
the roots that's why
trees get high.*

So here's something that I feel I know about Nature: that whatever you want to believe you can look into it and find something to help you believe that. And yet that does not mean Nature is . . . anything, as in whatever you want it to be. Nor, quite, the opposite? So not that **"one cannot derive an ought from an is"**⁵ so much as that one ought not? For who is to say what follows where none may follow? And yet who is to say that such a realm is only oughts, entirely without what is and is not? *Who, indeed.*

ix.

Gnosis can be given a logical form:

"This sentence is false."⁶ But it breaks logic without breaking out of it: *The following sentence is true, The previous sentence is false.* A prison of thought, if it is even right to call such machinations thought? If such logics might constitute the end of thought? Some last gasp attempt at finding someone or something else to make up our minds for us? *Trapped on the see-saw with a logicosaurus? A momentary fling with the bones that gnaw us? The red claws that seem to draw us closer to the black and white jaws of supernatural right and wrong?*

BANG! The walls have blown out, but the **Prince of Explosion**⁷ charges a heavy price: if this was right: by which you live and that was wrong: by which you died, and one was black and one was white, and one was war, and peace another, and again another peace, a perpetual puzzling—a shocked grey face that walks the streets in a dangerous kind of safety, smiles saved for home, for the well known, for the rainbow that says not that I will not destroy you again, not that there will be no more floods of tears, but that *this is between me and you. Sorry dude. Thanks.*

x.

At least we can be together in the senseless, that is the sense of senses. Our cosmic context. Thus solving the problem of the mover that does not move you, nor I, them neither. Sorry, dissolving the problem: the origin already unoriginal, the most primal state of purity already fallen. Innocence already experienced, incorruptible now. Now, like I, the disappearance of time, the place where past and future meet /meet, the manufacture of time, the primal fracture that is the apparent disappearance of time. The place in which it appears, *I am, we are, ours*. The mercurial. The meta-phoreal. **Literally.**

xi.

It might perhaps, at first, seem strange that a self-contradictory sentence, hence one which no ideal receiver would accept, is regarded as carrying with it the most inclusive information. It should, however, be emphasized that semantic information is here not meant as implying truth. A false sentence which happens to say much is thereby highly informative in our sense. Whether the information it carries is true or false, scientifically valuable or not, and so forth, does not concern us. A self-contradictory sentence asserts too much; it is too informative to be true.⁸

xii.

Gyrus Cope: *I was thinking about ego as our way of relating to reality (in the Freudian sense of the reality principle). That makes you think that it's a basic necessity of acting in the world. But think of a skier, relating in a very concrete way to a very hard reality—ego is often an impediment to navigating smoothly. So the reality that ego relates to is less that of practical necessity, and more that of social relationships and negotiating the demands it wraps around practical necessities—that is, more fantasy than reality, in the hard, concrete sense. Again, the idea that social reality and its demands are hard, concrete things to relate to, would be the perspective of ego itself, reifying itself and its archetypal domain.*

Greg Nixon: *Mercurius personifies the collective unconscious which surrounds consciousness on all sides and which can be expressed only indirectly through its manifestations . . . The ego has a mysterious affinity to Mercurius. The ego, the son of darkness, is the first sunrise: the ego and its field of consciousness is light without and dark within, the **sol et eius umbra**. For in the source of light there is darkness for any amount of projection, and the ego grows out of the darkness of the psyche. (p. 21) Grinnell, R. (1973). **Alchemy in a Modern Woman: A Study in the Contrasexual Archetype.***

Sam Knot:

*I watched a science program on the planets⁹
the other day, Mercury surprised us
by still having elements that should have burned off
long ago, or maybe even never have been there to begin with . . .
so all we can do is change our stories:*

*it wasn't how we said it used to be, clearly,
so maybe it was more like this:*

*The four terrestrial (rocky) planets,
all possible contenders for (or sharers in)
that green golden crown—complex organic life—
Mercury got smacked closer to the sun, early on,
perhaps by some behemoth that was just passing through—
who knows? who knew? Maybe some of the dust from that collision
became Venus. Maybe not.*

*Mercury has a particularly elliptical orbit.
It is very hot, and very cold, it doesn't spin like us,
here on earth—but I can't remember how, or even
if it does . . . spin . . . I seem to remember you could walk there
in perpetual twilight, if you wanted. So many extremes in such a place,
I want to hold those planetary images in relation to
the undifferentiated nature of the cosmythillogical concept,
the mercurial **one**. It makes me wonder if such ideas
don't come after, for the source itself not mere indifference,
not simply unity—already different, primally impure, as in
differential ontology—something about the exacting nature
of reality and decision, something about how, if truly
a trickster it wiz, it wouldn't simply be
a misty thing, an inchoate source . . .
for such would never be able to transform
into what we thought it wasn't.*

*Thus we find ourselves imagining
the sun as a red giant, and close to the end of our time
here a distant moon comes to life*

*will we live there?
will it be something else?
would it be us even if
it was us?*

Endnotes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/10/opinion/denver-mushrooms-psilocybin.html>
2. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41537-019-0077-9>
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pheme>
4. <http://journalpsyche.org/jungian-model-psyche/>
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is-ought_problem
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liar_paradox
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle_of_explosion
8. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/information-semantic/>
9. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07922lr>

* * * * *

Franz Kafka



The Metamorphosis

[Classic Fiction]

I

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, armor-plated back and, when he lifted his head a little, he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position, and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

“What has happened to me?” he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out—Samsa was a commercial traveler—hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!

Gregor’s eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky—one could hear rain drops beating on the window gutter—made him quite melancholy. “What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense?” he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and, in his present condition, he could not turn himself over. However violently he forced himself towards his right side, he always rolled on to his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.

“Oh God,” he thought, “what an exhausting job I’ve picked! Traveling about, day in, day out. It’s much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office and, on top of that, there’s the trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends. The devil take it all!”

He felt a slight itching up on his belly; slowly pushed himself on his back nearer to the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily; identified the itching place which was surrounded by many small white spots the nature of which he could not understand; and made to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him.

He slid down again into his former position. “This getting up early,” he thought, “makes one quite stupid. A man needs his sleep. Other commercials live like harem women. For instance, when I come back to the hotel of a morning to write up the orders I’ve got, these others are only sitting down to breakfast. Let me just try that with my chief; I’d be sacked on the spot. Anyhow, that might be quite a good thing for me, who can tell? If I didn’t have to hold my hand because of my parents I’d have given notice long ago, I’d have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him endways from his desk!

It’s a queer way of doing, too, this sitting on high at a desk and talking down to employees, especially when they have to come quite near because the chief is hard of hearing. Well, there’s still hope; once I’ve saved enough money to pay back my parents’ debts to him—that should take another

five or six years—I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five."

He looked at the alarm clock ticking on the chest. "Heavenly Father!" he thought. It was half-past six o'clock and the hands were quietly moving on; it was even past the half-hour, it was getting on toward a quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not gone off? From the bed one could see that it had been properly set for four o'clock; of course it must have gone off. Yes, but was it possible to sleep quietly through that ear-splitting noise?

Well, he had not slept quietly, yet apparently all the more soundly for that. But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven o'clock; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his samples weren't even packed up, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and active. And even if he did catch the train, he wouldn't avoid a row with the chief, since the firm's porter would have been waiting for the five o'clock train, and would have long since reported his failure to turn up. The porter was a creature of the chief's, spineless and stupid.

Well, supposing he were to say he was sick? But that would be most unpleasant, and would look suspicious, since during his five years' employment he had not been ill once. The chief himself would be sure to come with the sick-insurance doctor, would reproach his parents with their son's laziness, and would cut all excuses short by referring to the insurance doctor, who of course regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers. *And would he be so far wrong on this occasion?* Gregor really felt quite well apart from a drowsiness that was utterly superfluous after such a long sleep, and he was even unusually hungry.

As all this was running through his mind at top speed without his being able to decide to leave his bed—the alarm clock had just struck a quarter to seven—there came a cautious tap at the door behind the head of his bed. "Gregor," said a voice—it was his mother's—"it's a quarter to seven. Hadn't you a train to catch?"

That gentle voice! Gregor had a shock as he heard his own voice answering hers, unmistakably his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone, that left the words in their clear shape only for the first moment and then rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly.

Gregor wanted to answer at length and explain everything, but in the circumstances he confined himself to saying: "Yes, yes, thank you, Mother, I'm getting up now."

The wooden door between them must have kept the change in his voice from being noticeable outside, for his mother contented herself with this statement and shuffled away. Yet this brief exchange of words had made the other members of the family aware that Gregor was still in the house, as they had not expected and, at one of the side doors, his father was already knocking, gently, yet with his fist.

"Gregor, Gregor," he called, "what's the matter with you?" And after a little while, he called again in a deeper voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door his sister was saying in a low, plaintive tone: "Gregor? Aren't you well? Are you needing anything?"

He answered them both at once: "I'm just ready," and did his best to make his voice sound as normal as possible by enunciating the words very clearly and leaving long pauses between them. So his father went back to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: "Gregor, open the door, do."

However, he was not thinking of opening the door, and felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired in traveling of locking all doors during the night, even at home.

His immediate intention was to get up quietly without being disturbed, to put on his clothes and, above all, eat his breakfast, and only then to consider what else was to be done; since in bed, he was well aware, his meditations would come to no sensible conclusion. He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by awkward postures, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up, and he looked forward eagerly to seeing this morning's delusions gradually fall away. That the change in his voice was nothing but the precursor of a severe chill, a standing ailment of commercial travelers, he had not the least possible doubt.

To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult, especially because he was so uncommonly broad. He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead, he had only the numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions, and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them, it was the first to stretch itself straight; and did he succeed at last in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved the more wildly in a high degree of unpleasant agitation. “But what’s the use of lying idle in bed?” said Gregor to himself.

He thought that he might get out of bed with the lower part of his body first, but this lower part, which he had not yet seen, and of which he could form no clear conception, proved too difficult to move; it shifted so slowly; and when finally, almost wild with annoyance, he gathered his forces together and thrust out recklessly, he had miscalculated the direction and bumped heavily against the lower end of the bed, and the stinging pain he felt informed him that precisely this lower part of his body was at the moment probably the most sensitive.

So he tried to get the top part of himself out first, and cautiously moved his head towards the edge of the bed. That proved easy enough and, despite its breadth and mass, the bulk of his body at last slowly followed the movement of his head. Still, when he finally got his head free over the edge of the bed, he felt too scared to go on advancing for, after all, if he let himself fall in this way it would take a miracle to keep his head from being injured. And at all costs he must not lose consciousness now, precisely now; he would rather stay in bed.

But when after a repetition of the same efforts he lay in his former position again, sighing, and watched his little legs struggling against each other more wildly than ever, if that were possible, and saw no way of bringing any order into this arbitrary confusion, he told himself again that it was impossible to stay in bed, and that the most sensible course was to risk everything for the smallest hope of getting away from it.

At the same time, he did not forget to remind himself that cool reflection, the coolest possible, was much better than desperate resolves. In such moments, he focused his eyes as sharply as possible on the window but, unfortunately, the prospect of the morning fog, which muffled even the other side of the narrow street, brought him little encouragement and comfort.

“Seven o’clock already,” he said to himself when the alarm clock chimed again, “seven o’clock already and still such a thick fog.” And, for a little while, he lay quiet, breathing lightly, as if perhaps expecting such complete repose to restore all things to their real and normal condition.

But then he said to himself: “Before it strikes a quarter past seven, I must be quite out of this bed, without fail. Anyhow, by that time someone will have come from the office to ask for me, since it opens before seven.” And he set himself to rocking his whole body at once in a regular rhythm, with the idea of swinging it out of the bed. If he tipped himself out in that way, he could keep his head from injury by lifting it at an acute angle when he fell. His back seemed to be hard and was not likely to suffer from a fall on the carpet. His biggest worry was the loud crash he would not be able to help making, which would probably cause anxiety, if not terror, behind all the doors. Still, he must take the risk.

When he was already half out of the bed—the new method was more a game than an effort, for he needed only to hitch himself across by rocking to and fro—it struck him how simple it would be if he could get help. Two strong people—he thought of his father and the servant girl—would be amply sufficient. They would only have to thrust their arms under his convex back, lever him out of the bed, bend down with their burden, and then be patient enough to let him turn himself right over on to the floor, where it was to be hoped his legs would then find their proper function. Well, ignoring the fact that the doors were all locked, ought he really to call for help? In spite of his misery he could not suppress a smile at the very idea of it.

He had got so far that he could barely keep his equilibrium when he rocked himself strongly, and he would have to nerve himself very soon for the final decision, since in five minutes’ time it would be a quarter past seven—when the front door bell rang.



"That's someone from the office," he said to himself, and grew almost rigid, while his little legs only jiggled about all the faster. For a moment everything stayed quiet. "They're not going to open the door," said Gregor to himself, catching at some kind of irrational hope.

But then of course the servant girl went as usual to the door with her heavy tread and opened it. Gregor needed only to hear the first good morning of the visitor to know immediately who it was—the chief clerk himself. What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion!

Were all employees in a body nothing but scoundrels? Was there not among them one single loyal devoted man who, had he wasted only an hour or so of the firm's time in a morning, was so tormented by conscience as to be driven out of his mind and actually incapable of leaving his bed? Wouldn't it really have been sufficient to send an apprentice to inquire—if any inquiry were necessary at all—did the chief clerk himself have to come and thus indicate to the entire family, an innocent family, that this suspicious circumstance could be investigated by no one less versed in affairs than himself?

And more through the agitation caused by these reflections than through any act of will, Gregor swung himself out of bed with all his strength. There was a loud thump, but it was not really a crash. His fall was broken to some extent by the carpet; his back, too, was less stiff than he thought, and so there was merely a dull thud, not so very startling. Only he had not lifted his head carefully enough and had hit it; he turned it and rubbed it on the carpet in pain and irritation.

"That was something falling down in there," said the chief clerk in the next room to the left. Gregor tried to suppose to himself that something like what had happened to him today might some day happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible. But, as if in brusque reply to this supposition, the chief clerk took a couple of firm steps in the next-door room and his patent leather boots creaked.

From the right-hand room his sister was whispering to inform him of the situation: "Gregor, the chief clerk's here." "I know," muttered Gregor to himself; but he didn't dare to make his voice loud enough for his sister to hear it.

"Gregor," said his father now from the left-hand room, "the chief clerk has come and wants to know why you didn't catch the early train. We don't know what to say to him. Besides, he wants to talk to you in person. So open the door, please. He will be good enough to excuse the untidiness of your room."

"Good morning, Mr. Samsa," the chief clerk was calling amiably meanwhile. "He's not well," said his mother to the visitor, while his father was still speaking through the door, "he's not well, sir, believe me. What else would make him miss a train! The boy thinks about nothing but his work. It makes me almost cross the way he never goes out in the evenings; he's been here the last eight days and has stayed at home every single evening. He just sits there quietly at the table reading a newspaper or looking through railway timetables. The only amusement he gets is doing fretwork. For instance, he spent two or three evenings cutting out a little picture frame; you would be surprised to see how pretty it is; it's hanging in his room; you'll see it in a minute when Gregor opens the door. I must say I'm glad you've come, sir; we should never have got him to unlock the door by ourselves; he's so obstinate; and I'm sure he's unwell, though he wouldn't have it to be so this morning."

"I'm just coming," said Gregor slowly and carefully, not moving an inch for fear of losing one word of the conversation.

"I can't think of any other explanation, madam," said the chief clerk. "I hope it's nothing serious. Although on the other hand I must say that we men of business—fortunately or unfortunately—very often simply have to ignore any slight indisposition, since business must be attended to."

"Well, can the chief clerk come in now?" asked Gregor's father impatiently, again knocking on the door.

"No," said Gregor. In the left-hand room a painful silence followed this refusal; in the right-

hand room his sister began to sob.

Why didn't his sister join the others? She was probably newly out of bed and hadn't even begun to put on her clothes yet. Well, why was she crying? Because he wouldn't get up and let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job, and because the chief would begin dunning his parents again for the old debts?

Surely these were things one didn't need to worry about for the present. Gregor was still at home, and not in the least thinking of deserting the family. At the moment, true, he was lying on the carpet and no one who knew the condition he was in could seriously expect him to admit the chief clerk. But for such a small discourtesy, which could plausibly be explained away somehow later on, Gregor could hardly be dismissed on the spot. And it seemed to Gregor that it would be much more sensible to leave him in peace for the present than to trouble him with tears and entreaties. Still, of course, their uncertainty bewildered them all and excused their behavior.

"Mr. Samsa," the chief clerk called now in a louder voice, "what's the matter with you? Here you are, barricading yourself in your room, giving only 'yes' and 'no' for answers, causing your parents a lot of unnecessary trouble and neglecting—I mention this only in passing—neglecting your business duties in an incredible fashion. I am speaking here in the name of your parents and of your chief, and I beg you quite seriously to give me an immediate and precise explanation. You amaze me, you amaze me.

"I thought you were a quiet, dependable person, and now all at once you seem bent on making a disgraceful exhibition of yourself. The chief did hint to me early this morning a possible explanation for your disappearance—with reference to the cash payments that were entrusted to you recently—but I almost pledged my solemn word of honor that this could not be so. But now that I see how incredibly obstinate you are, I no longer have the slightest desire to take your part at all. And your position in the firm is not so unassailable.

"I came with the intention of telling you all this in private but, since you are wasting my time so needlessly, I don't see why your parents shouldn't hear it too. For some time past your work has been most unsatisfactory; this is not the season of the year for a business boom, of course, we admit that, but a season of the year for doing no business at all, that does not exist, Mr. Samsa, must not exist."

"But, sir," cried Gregor, beside himself and in his agitation forgetting everything else, "I'm just going to open the door this very minute. A slight illness, an attack of giddiness, has kept me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed. But I feel all right again. I'm getting out of bed now. Just give me a moment or two longer! I'm not quite so well as I thought. But I'm all right, really. How a thing like that can suddenly strike one down! Only last night I was quite well, my parents can tell you, or rather I did have a slight presentiment. I must have showed some sign of it.

"I don't know why didn't I report it at the office! But one always thinks that an indisposition can be got over without staying in the house. Oh sir, do spare my parents! All that you're reproaching me with now has no foundation; no one has ever said a word to me about it. Perhaps you haven't looked at the last orders I sent in. Anyhow, I can still catch the eight o'clock train, I'm much the better for my few hours' rest. Don't let me detain you here, sir; I'll be attending to business very soon, and do be good enough to tell the chief so and to make my excuses to him!"

And while all this was tumbling out pell-mell, and Gregor hardly knew what he was saying, he had reached the chest quite easily, perhaps because of the practice he had had in bed, and was now trying to lever himself upright by means of it. He meant actually to open the door, actually to show himself and speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, after all their insistence, would say at the sight of him. If they were horrified, then the responsibility was no longer his, and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset, and could really get to the station for the eight o'clock train if he hurried.

At first he slipped down a few times from the polished surface of the chest, but at length with a last heave he stood upright; he paid no more attention to the pains in the lower part of his body, however they smarted. Then he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair, and clung with his

little legs to the edges of it. That brought him into control of himself again and he stopped speaking, for now he could listen to what the chief clerk was saying.

"Did you understand a word of it?" the chief clerk was asking, "surely he can't be trying to make fools of us?"

"Oh dear," cried his mother, in tears, "perhaps he's terribly ill and we're tormenting him. Grete! Grete!" she called out then.

"Yes, Mother?" called his sister from the other side. They were calling to each other across Gregor's room.

"You must go this minute for the doctor. Gregor is ill. Go for the doctor, quick. Did you hear how he was speaking?"

"That was no human voice," said the chief clerk in a voice noticeably low beside the shrillness of the mother's.

"Anna! Anna!" his father was calling through the hall to the kitchen, clapping his hands, "get a locksmith at once!" And the two girls were already running through the hall with a swish of skirts—how could his sister have got dressed so quickly?—and were tearing the front door open. There was no sound of its closing again; they had evidently left it open, as one does in houses where some great misfortune has happened.

But Gregor was now much calmer. The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them. Yet, at any rate, people now believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle, and hoped for great and remarkable results from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really distinguishing precisely between them.

To make his voice as clear as possible for the decisive conversation that was now imminent, he coughed a little, as quietly as he could, of course, since this noise too might not sound like a human cough for all he was able to judge. In the next room, meanwhile, there was complete silence. Perhaps his parents were sitting at the table with the chief clerk, whispering; perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening.

Slowly, Gregor pushed the chair towards the door, then let go of it, caught hold of the door for support—the soles at the end of his little legs were somewhat sticky—and rested against it for a moment after his efforts.

Then he set himself to turning the key in the lock with his mouth. It seemed, unhappily, that he hadn't really any teeth—what could he grip the key with?—but, on the other hand, his jaws were certainly very strong; with their help he did manage to set the key in motion, heedless of the fact that he was undoubtedly damaging them somewhere, since a brown fluid issued from his mouth, flowed over the key and dripped on the floor.

"Just listen to that," said the chief clerk next door, "he's turning the key." That was a great encouragement to Gregor, but they should all have shouted encouragement to him, his father and mother too. "Go on, Gregor," they should have called out, "keep going, hold on to that key!"

And in the belief that they were all following his efforts intently, he clenched his jaws recklessly on the key with all the force at his command. As the turning of the key progressed, he circled round the lock, holding on now only with his mouth, pushing on the key, as required, or pulling it down again with all the weight of his body. The louder click of the finally yielding lock literally quickened Gregor. With a deep breath of relief he said to himself, "So I didn't need the locksmith," and laid his head on the handle to open the door wide.

Since he had to pull the door towards him, he was still invisible when it was really wide open. He had to edge himself slowly round the near half of the double door, and to do it very carefully if he was not to fall plump upon his back just on the threshold.

He was still carrying out this difficult maneuver, with no time to observe anything else, when he heard the chief clerk utter a loud “Oh!”—it sounded like a gust of wind—and now he could see the man, standing as he was nearest to the door, clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure.

His mother—in spite of the chief clerk’s being there, her hair was still undone and sticking up in all directions—first clasped her hands and looked at his father, then took two steps towards Gregor and fell on the floor among her outspread skirts, her face quite hidden on her breast.

His father knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept till his great chest heaved.

Gregor did not go now into the living room, but leaned against the inside of the firmly shut wing of the door, so that only half his body was visible, and his head above it bending sideways to look at the others.

The light had meanwhile strengthened; on the other side of the street one could see clearly a section of the endlessly long, dark gray building opposite—it was a hospital—abruptly punctuated by its row of regular windows. The rain was still falling, but only in large singly discernible and literally singly splashing drops.

The breakfast dishes were set out on the table lavishly, for breakfast was the most important meal of the day to Gregor’s father, who lingered it out for hours over various newspapers. Right opposite Gregor on the wall hung a photograph of himself on military service, as a lieutenant, hand on sword, a carefree smile on his face, inviting one to respect his uniform and military bearing. The door leading to the hall was open, and one could see that the front door stood open too, showing the landing beyond, and the beginning of the stairs going down.

“Well,” said Gregor, knowing perfectly that he was the only one who had retained any composure, “I’ll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples, and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I’m not obstinate, and I’m willing to work. Traveling is a hard life, but I couldn’t live without it.

“Where are you going, sir? To the office? Yes? Will you give a true account of all this? One can be temporarily incapacitated, but that’s just the moment for remembering former services and bearing in mind that later on, when the incapacity has been got over, one will certainly work with all the more industry and concentration. I’m loyally bound to serve the chief, you know that very well. Besides, I have to provide for my parents and my sister. I’m in great difficulties, but I’ll get out of them again.

“Don’t make things any worse for me than they are. Stand up for me in the firm. Travelers are not popular there, I know. People think they earn sacks of money and just have a good time. A prejudice there’s no particular reason for revising. But you, sir, have a more comprehensive view of affairs than the rest of the staff, yes, let me tell you in confidence, a more comprehensive view than the chief himself who, being the owner, lets his judgment easily be swayed against one of his employees.

“And you know very well that the traveler, who is never seen in the office almost the whole year round, can so easily fall a victim to gossip and ill luck and unfounded complaints, which he mostly knows nothing about, except when he comes back exhausted from his rounds, and only then suffers in person from their evil consequences, which he can no longer trace back to the original causes. Sir, sir, don’t go away without a word to me to show that you think me in the right at least to some extent!”

But at Gregor’s very first words, the chief clerk had already backed away and only stared at him with parted lips over one twitching shoulder. And while Gregor was speaking, he did not stand still one moment but stole away towards the door, without taking his eyes off Gregor, yet only an inch at a time, as if obeying some secret injunction to leave the room.

He was already at the hall, and the suddenness with which he took his last step out of the living room would have made one believe he had burned the sole of his foot. Once in the hall, he stretched his right arm before him towards the staircase, as if some supernatural power were waiting there to deliver

him.

Gregor perceived that the chief clerk must on no account be allowed to go away in this frame of mind, if his position in the firm were not to be endangered to the utmost. His parents did not understand this so well; they had convinced themselves in the course of years that Gregor was settled for life in this firm and, besides, they were so preoccupied with their immediate troubles that all foresight had forsaken them.

Yet Gregor had this foresight. The chief clerk must be detained, soothed, persuaded, and finally won over; the whole future of Gregor and his family depended on it! If only his sister had been there! She was intelligent; she had begun to cry while Gregor was still lying quietly on his back. And no doubt the chief clerk so partial to ladies would have been guided by her; she would have shut the door of the flat and in the hall talked him out of his horror.

But she was not there, and Gregor would have to handle the situation himself. And without remembering that he was still unaware what powers of movement he possessed, without even remembering that his words in all possibility, indeed in all likelihood, would again be unintelligible, he let go the wing of the door, pushed himself through the opening, started to walk towards the chief clerk, who was already ridiculously clinging with both hands to the railing on the landing; but immediately, as he was feeling for a support, he fell down with a little cry upon all his numerous legs.

Hardly was he down when he experienced for the first time this morning a sense of physical comfort; his legs had firm ground under them; they were completely obedient, as he noted with joy; they even strove to carry him forward in whatever direction he chose; and he was inclined to believe that a final relief from all his sufferings was at hand.

But in the same moment as he found himself on the floor, rocking with suppressed eagerness to move, not far from his mother, indeed just in front of her, she, who had seemed so completely crushed, sprang all at once to her feet, her arms and fingers outspread, cried: "Help, for God's sake, help!" bent her head down as if to see Gregor better, yet on the contrary kept backing senselessly away; had quite forgotten that the laden table stood behind her; sat upon it hastily, as if in absence of mind, when she bumped into it; and seemed altogether unaware that the big coffee pot beside her was upset and pouring coffee in a flood over the carpet.

"Mother, Mother," said Gregor in a low voice, and looked up at her. The chief clerk for the moment, had quite slipped from his mind; instead, he could not resist snapping his jaws together at the sight of the streaming coffee. That made his mother scream again. She fled from the table and fell into the arms of his father, who hastened to catch her.

But Gregor had now no time to spare for his parents; the chief clerk was already on the stairs; with his chin on the banisters he was taking one last backward look. Gregor made a spring, to be as sure as possible of overtaking him. The chief clerk must have divined his intention, for he leaped down several steps and vanished; he was still yelling "Ugh!" and it echoed through the whole staircase.

Unfortunately, the flight of the chief clerk seemed completely to upset Gregor's father, who had remained relatively calm until now; for instead of running after the man himself, or at least not hindering Gregor, in his pursuit, he seized in his right hand the walking stick which the chief clerk had left behind on a chair, together with a hat and greatcoat, snatched in his left hand a large newspaper from the table, and began stamping his feet and flourishing the stick and the newspaper to drive Gregor back into his room. No entreaty of Gregor's availed; indeed, no entreaty was even understood; however humbly he bent his head, his father only stamped on the floor the more loudly.

Behind his father, his mother had torn open a window, despite the cold weather, and was leaning far out of it with her face in her hands. A strong draught set in from the street to the staircase, the window curtains blew in, the newspapers on the table fluttered, stray pages whisked over the floor.

Pitilessly, Gregor's father drove him back, hissing and crying "Shoo!" like a savage. But Gregor was quite unpracticed in walking backwards; it really was a slow business. If he only had a chance to turn round, he could get back to his room at once; but he was afraid of exasperating his father by the

slowness of such a rotation and, at any moment, the stick in his father's hand might hit him a fatal blow on the back or on the head.

In the end, however, nothing else was left for him to do since, to his horror, he observed that in moving backwards he could not even control the direction he took. And so, keeping an anxious eye on his father all the time over his shoulder, he began to turn round as quickly as he could, which was in reality very slowly.

Perhaps his father noted his good intentions, for he did not interfere except every now and then to help him in the maneuver from a distance with the point of the stick. If only he would have stopped making that unbearable hissing noise! It made Gregor quite lose his head. He had turned almost completely round when the hissing noise so distracted him that he even turned a little the wrong way again.

But when at last his head was fortunately right in front of the doorway, it appeared that his body was too broad simply to get through the opening. His father, of course, in his present mood, was far from thinking of such a thing as opening the other half of the door, to let Gregor have enough space. He had merely the fixed idea of driving Gregor back into his room as quickly as possible. He would never have suffered Gregor to make the circumstantial preparations for standing up on end, and perhaps slipping his way through the door. Maybe he was now making more noise than ever to urge Gregor forward, as if no obstacle impeded him; to Gregor, anyhow, the noise in his rear sounded no longer like the voice of one single father. This was really no joke, and Gregor thrust himself—come what might—into the doorway.

One side of his body rose up, he was tilted at an angle in the doorway, his flank was quite bruised, horrid blotches stained the white door. Soon he was stuck fast and, left to himself, could not have moved at all, his legs on one side fluttered trembling in the air, those on the other were crushed painfully to the floor—when, from behind, his father gave him a strong push which was literally a deliverance, and he flew far into the room, bleeding freely. The door was slammed behind him with the stick, and then at last there was silence.

To be continued in Cenacle | 112 | June 2020

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Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Six Kisses [Interlude]

*for friends near & far,
all of you, up there,
down deep, for all of you,
for all of us . . .*

Art she dances alone,
the world her loneliness at partner,
crowds sometimes near,
sometimes watching,
often not,

Art she remembers,
by glints & melodies,
moves the world moves her,
moves near, moves away,
down & up & out,

Art she reaches,
to a like or novel touch,
for a taste like breathlessness,
a scent her bones know better
than her rest,

Art she loves chocolate & kisses,
& rusted skylines,
& ideas of loving new & ancient,
burst of wild clock
& slow . . . to . . . no . . . time,

Art she lives & mourns & bores
& wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
& skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel
stretching far,

Art & I love you.
 Art & I dance you.
 Art & you spit me, & smile.
 Art & you gesture me near,
 nearer, a breath's closest . . .
Art, you gesture me on!

* * * * *

Hmmmmmm.

*"Stand in the place
 that you are."*

—R.E.M., "Stand," 1988.

This office is calm, calm, its only noises scratching black pen on white lined paper, breathing, shiftings in a chair, maybe a little leaked rock & roll from headphones, Phish 12/31/2019, New York City, "and the light is growing brighter now . . ."

There is the *Labyrinthine* version so far on pages, the version ever percolating in my mind, & the experience of writing it, word by word, line by line, page by page, minutes, hours, days, years—

This book resumes near 3½ months since last lines, & the world is sick, was getting sick then, is now globally sick, millions, & thousands have died, & thousands more will—

Not a human war, or a local natural catastrophe, but global, a virus, uninterested in humans as political, social, artistic, emotional beings, & many other kinds too; no, humans are a host, & a new one to this virus, & not very good at that, keep dying—

And humans, facing this situation, this profound & intimate crisis that nobody is immune from, above, below, have responded better & worse; with resentment, feelings of inconvenience, wanting to blame someone; calling it a *war* as though the virus thinks like that, like humans—

Helplessness, desperation, & the only immediately sound response is to hide away from each other, wait it out while heroic doctors & nurses & other needed people try to keep the world of humans from dying off more than—

And it's lonely. And it's angry. And it's sad. Many people work at home, on computers. Many collect jobless benefits. Everyone waits.

The would-be King of America rages & threatens futilely, calling the virus an enemy & the situation a war. Is helpless, & heeds no advice. Because to heed advice is to admit he knows nothing & others should be planning what to do. *His actions save nobody.*

There is no blizzard out the window. High, damaging winds. Flood, fire, quake. Swarms or packs or invaders with swords or guns.

There is the complete indifference of a microscopic virus & its doing what it does.



I don't know.
I wish I had more than guesses.

* * * * *

Some people are still driving out to beaches, congregating for church services, getting sick or causing others to get sick—

There are many people bravely tending others, at risk of their own lives—

States in the U.S. are sending each other spare medical supplies—

The criminal in the White House touts unproven drugs, & lies about progress, & numbers, & statuses—he gives a fuck only for his money, his friends' money—won't wear a mask to encourage others—

“Break the cycle of transmission” the radio says—“it's the only way”

Doctors deciding who lives & who dies among the critically sick—over 65 deferred to under—& as they die, denied medical care, their loved ones cannot visit them—

* * * * *

Kassi & I have been locked down for four weeks now, & it's funny that we've been 7 years in this house, called Bungalow Cee, never in that time home for such a stretch—

We watch the TV news, read the online news, talk with distant friends & colleagues—we order food deliveries, as needed, watching inventory of what we have—

I have a new job, now a week & a half at it, my colleagues faces & voices on the computer. So our income is steady & sure for now—

There are too many people who will not acknowledge this crisis & work together—

I'm in a bed, under several comforters, yellow, green, & my beat notebook's lined paper is lit by a reading light clipped to it—Polly iPod is playing a news show about the virus, worried voices on my headphones—

I wonder if this crisis's peak is days or weeks or months away—

It's near midnight, fuzzy weird days pass by—

I send my love & wish for health & safety to all.

I must find a way to take these pages back—I feel more helpless than anything—pen moving is my hope—

*The Creatures are napping peaceful.
And something in this.
To turn this book's attention.*

*Grasp back some of its weird magick.
Very peaceful.*

* * * * *

*"So goodbye nonbeliever
Don't you know that I hate
to leave here
So long babe, I got the
flashback blues."
—John Prine, 1971*

I'd heard Prine's name, but never his music. He died this past week, victim of the pandemic.

So I listened to his first album, self-titled from 1971. Wonderful, garrulous, deep grabbag of tuneful goodies. I'll spin it again on my radio show tonight, tribute & delight.

Kassi learned to make sourdough bread this past week from scratch, a weird involving process, & a nice result too.

These seem like random notes before starting in on Part Twelve of this book. Maybe this is warmup. Maybe finding the right moment to immerse in it is a struggle during a global pandemic.

The greedy & powerful want it to end ASAP so they can go back to making money. They don't care its hows or whys. *Just: it's in their way.*

I suppose most everyone would have it over sooner than later if the single cost was not knowing how or why.

Things change, they don't undo. Better to get the how & why even if this is harder.

Get it, try hard, then let it go.

*This interlude concludes.
This time of greater peril.
It's many heroes, it's fewer
assholes.
Things change, they don't undo.
Still, sunsets through trees.
What happens next?
4/11/2020*

Then what. Not quite Part Twelve yet, but not “Prelude” either. Kind of a wilderland of lines.

Friend called this book, maybe other things I write too, “cozy surrealism”

“You’re the only one I know
who can take such far-out material
& make it warm & fuzzy”
he said.

Nice words, knowing words.

I believe in what I write, who I write about, their travels & their worries, their longings & homes.

If an imp regards me with merry eyes, I am thus regarded. Nice regard, knowing eyes.

Part Twelve my ideas are as big as ever, wanting more, a farther reach back, around, out & on—

Creatures are warm & fuzzy, & surely as surreal as people-folks. Well, mostly. Easy to write about them, how they are, or at least how best I understand them at this point.

Another digression: I’ve been reading George MacDonald’s first fantasy book, *Phantastes*, 1858, & his last, *Lilith*, 1895, & delighting in his digressions. Nearly four decades separate those books, a young man, an old man, & I think his writing is even better in the latter, but his style remains digressive. Immerse in an Imaginal Space deep enough & the numbers & layers of stories become endless—

Part Twelve: what shall be its epigraph, or several, or none?

I don’t have a structural plan for it, its near & far doors are flung wide open—

Just as I decided in 2006 that *Labyrinthine* itself would adhere to no length of pages or time, so Part Twelve will simply go—will become what it is—

So not rushing it. Letting it open out & out & out.

The music is trippy good as horns swirl around drums swirl around words surreal & fuzzy & warm

Watch this: I’m not knowing but the pen in my hand is moving faster & faster watch it go, the music surreal fuzzys round Part Twelve of *Labyrinthine* let it be let it be let it be

Creatures are fuzzy & surreal

A beautiful fox ran by, in the distance, lean tan body, long tail, sharp-eared, far beyond those tracks beyond the back fence, there & gone—

White-tipped tail, the animals see people-folks less often, the air is clearer—

the world’s not so poisoned as for so long

“Labyrinthine Part Twelve
 Are you ready”
 No words
 OK, so I nod.
 And so.



To be continued in Cenacle | 112 | June 2020

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*WITHIN'S WITHIN: SCENES
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NEW ENGLAND

Notes on Contributors

Algernon Beagle lives in Bags End. He is the Editor guy for *Bags End News*. Delightful books made from the stories in his delightful newspaper appear regularly in *The Cenacle*.

Charlie Beyer lives in New Castle, Colorado. His shaggy-wild prose appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. It's mining season again for Mr. Beyer, writes me that it "gets my juices going. Already the characters are tumbling to my pen. A few more radical encounters & the plot will emerge." More of his writings can be found at <http://therubyeye.blogspot.com>. Have fun, Charlie!

Ace Boggess lives in Charleston, West Virginia. His poetry & fiction appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. Keeping safe during this pandemic, though he "could use a million dollars. But hey, who couldn't?" His new book of poetry is *Misadventure*, published by Cyberwit in February 2020.

Joe Ciccone lives in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Recommends to all, as a doctor (as well as a poet) that, during this pandemic, the pretty safe bet for being out in public is hand washing, Purell, face masks, & not touching one's face. His 2000 poetry RaiBook, *North of Jersey*, can be found at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/raibooks/northofjersey.html>.

John Echem lives in Asskwa Ibom State, Nigeria & teaches English at local schools. His poetry last appeared in *Cenacle* | 110 | December 2019. He & his country-people are hanging tough in tough times. I can only wish you every good & safe moment, John.

ElectroLounge Forums is a discussion community for contributors to *The Cenacle*, found at <http://electrolounge.boards.net/>. Writers, artists, photographers, & readers are encouraged to request a membership (no charge) & visit these forums to meet, & perhaps join, those whose works fill the pages of *The Cenacle*.

Leia Friedman lives in Costa Rica, where she is working on small farm. Her prose last appeared in *Cenacle* | 107 | April 2019. I wish you good & fruitful days, Leia, until you can safely return to the U.S.

Judih Haggai lives at Kibbutz Nir Oz in Israel. Her poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Her kibbutz is, for her in these rough times, a kind of save haven. I'm glad to hear this. Her 2004 poetry RaiBook, *Spirit World Restless*, can be found at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/raibooks/spiritworldrestless.html>.

Jimmy Heffernan lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. His prose appears frequently in *The Cenacle*. His most recent book is *Many Worlds: A Collection of Poems*, published by Modern Memoirs in 2019. Jimmy is staying home, staying safe, like the rest of us. Hopeful, like so many, that the criminal in the White House can be brought down finally on Election Day this November.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Kansas City, Kansas. Chapters from his epic work-in-progress, *Nighttime Daydreams*, appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. His most recent book is *Bat Dreams (Nighttime Daydreams Book 2)*, published by Amazon in 2019. It can be found online at: <https://tinyurl.com/yyw3g6sv>. He is also at work on a kind of book/literary magazine hybrid of his & others' work. Can't wait to see!

Ekponoimo Iphyok lives in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. His wonderful photographs are a new treasure in the pages of this journal. Regarding this work, he explains that “this album is birthed from the passion I have for humanity and nature. My pictures are about telling stories untold, and revealing the unseen. Both the good and bad side, like a tossed coin. That’s how I see life.” More of his wonderful work can be found online at: <https://instagram.com/ginuenpixels>.

Colin James lives in western Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. He is laying low during this pandemic, though thinking of growing some of the good green stuff in his garden. Not to use, mind you . . . His most recent book of poetry, *Resisting Probability*, was published by Sagging Meniscus Press in 2017.

Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883, & died in Kierling in 1924. He is one of the 20th century’s greatest fiction writers. Scriptor Press reprinted his amazing story “The Metamorphosis,” in chapbook form, as part of the 2002 Burning Man Books series. This volume can be found online at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/nobordersbookstore.html>.

Sam Knot lives in rural France. His poetry now appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. He’s working his farm, writing his poems, loving his wife, & waiting out the hard days. Visit samknot.com for more of his work.

Tamara Miles lives in Elgin, South Carolina. Her poetry & prose appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. She also hosts the excellent poetry show, “Where the Most Light Falls,” on SpiritPlants Radio (spiritplantsradio.com). Her greenhouse writings are a delightful new addition to this journal!

Martina Newberry lives in Palm Springs, California. Her poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Her recent book of poetry, *Blues for French Roast with Chicory*, was published by Deerbrook Editions in 2019. She is keeping hope & keeping informed, best moves right now. More of her writings can be found at: <https://martinaneberry.wordpress.com>.

Tom Sheehan lives in Saugus, Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. His newest book of poetry is called *Jock Poems and Reflections for Proper Bostonians*, published by Pocol Press in 2019. His son is getting him outside some days, even now, to breathe in the good green & fresh air. Then back to his keyboard.

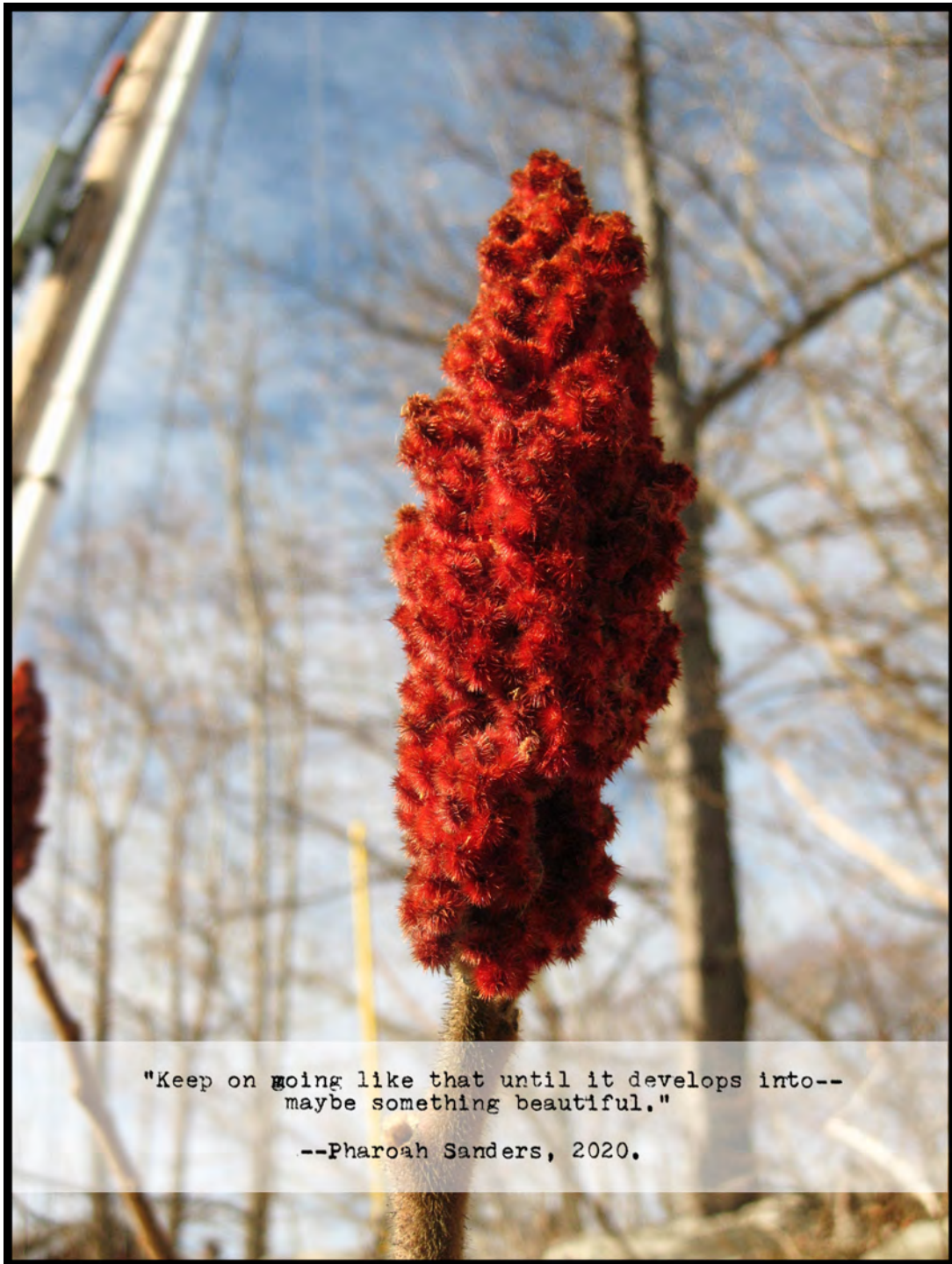
Kassandra Soulard lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. She’s why this 25th anniversary issue looks so fine to any pair of eyes lucky who see it.

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. 25 years of this journal . . . didn’t even have a “Notes on Contributors” back when. But it’s always been good in my heart, & one way to love & tender others . . . *thank you* . . .

Timothy Vilgiate lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. *Rivers of the Mind [A Novel]* is his first contribution to this journal, & a wonderful one. His fiction is amazing, & a wonderful pleasure to publish. The radio version of *Rivers of the Mind*, a wonder in its own right, can be found online at: <https://riversofthemind.libsyn.com>.

* * * * *





"Keep on going like that until it develops into--
maybe something beautiful."

--Pharoah Sanders, 2020.

